RAPTURE AND MELANCHOLY:

THE CULTURAL FUNCTION OF MUSIC IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

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Introduction and Thesis

Music plays a vital role in Toni Morrison's fiction. In a 1981 interview for *The New Republic* Morrison describes her work as bearing witness to "what the music used to do... the music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore" (LeClair, 26). And in the essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," published in Mari Evans's 1984 collection *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, Morrison also suggests that for a long time, music was a "healing" art for African-American people. "That music," she states, "is no longer exclusively ours... But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. I regard it as a way to accomplish certain very strong functions" ("Rootedness," 340).

These remarks suggest a number of fascinating issues regarding the inordinate significance of music for African Americans. Furthermore, they reveal Toni Morrison's perception of her role in the African-American cultural continuum, over which music has traditionally presided. In this paper I will examine the "certain very strong functions," or cultural information, that music has provided for African Americans, attempting to throw light on Morrison's reparation and transmission of these functions in her fiction.

Most critics who have explored Morrison's work agree that it has a cohesive, yet elusive, musical quality. When Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature on 7 October 1993, Michiko Kakutani paid homage to her *oeuvre* in *The New York Times*, stressing the salvific power of music in her novels. Kakutani claims:

> Indeed redemption always remains a possibility for Ms. Morrison's characters, because as brutal as her vision so often seems, she writes with a deep appreciation of 'the music the world makes,' as she puts it in *Jazz*. 'What is curious to me,' she once said, 'is that bestial treatment of human beings never produces a race of beasts.' (Kakutani, B10).

While most critics concur with Kakutani that Morrison does appreciate the music the world makes, very few agree on exactly what kind of music Morrison's characters create for themselves and the world.

Many readers who have specifically examined the way in which Morrison's novels incorporate music have used *The New Republic* interview as a starting point for their discussions. For example, Joyce M. Wegs, citing the interview, argues that "Morrison provides several clues that the black music she emulates in this novel [*Song of Solomon*] is the blues and not, for instance, jazz." (Wegs, 212). Anthony J. Berrett, in "Toni Morrison's Literary Jazz," also uses her *New Republic* statement as a theme but, in contrast to Wegs, categorizes the music in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* as jazz rather than the blues. Eusebio L. Rodrigues in "The Telling of Beloved" presents a provocative account of the way in which "Morrison fuses arts that belong to black oral folk tradition with strategies that are sophisticatedly modern in order to create the blues mode in fiction" (Rodrigues, 153). And Lillie B. Fryar, in her dissertation *The Aesthetics of Language: Harper, Hurston and Morrison*, concludes that the music in Morrison's novels must be "rhythm and blues" because the novels resonate with troubled love affairs. In my own consideration of the music Morrison emulates in her fiction, I find these discussions too focused on the superficial "sound tracks of gospel songs, folk tunes, standards, and blues

[which] many of her characters sing, hum, or whistle through scenes of joy and trouble" (Berrett, 268), ignoring the deeper significance that music plays in Morrison's work.

Instead, I propose an alternative mode of inquiry to that of Wegs, Berrett, Rodrigues, and Fryar. While their somewhat idiosyncratic assumptions about the blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues suggest intriguing ideas about Morrison's texts, their analyses do not seem grounded in solid ethnomusicological evidence. In other words, these four readers have imposed subjective interpretations of what the blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues represent as musical forms, and then have superimposed their musical paradigms over Morrison's novels. According to Houston Baker, Jr., "the blues defy narrow definition" (*Blues*, 4). (By implication jazz and rhythm and blues, which are direct descendants of the blues, also defy exact definition.) Consequently, the critics' intuitive constructs of these musical forms actually obfuscate our understanding of Morrison's incorporation of music in her novels.

A more productive method of inquiry into the role of music in Morrison's texts, I believe, would be to examine the wellspring of African-American music by focusing on the West-African historical and cultural conditions that have shaped the African-American collective conscience. The historical and cultural method that I am proposing in this paper is loosely based on Angela Y. Davis's critical strategy in her 1990 essay, "Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle." In this essay, Davis discusses the musical contributions of the "Mother of the Blues," Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, a seminal female figure in the African-American musical tradition, who played a catalytic role in awakening collective social consciousness about the African-American predicament. Davis contextualizes Rainey's contributions within the traditions of African-American music, "traditions forged originally on the continent of Africa, then reshaped and honed by the conditions of slavery, the Reconstruction years, and the two world wars" (Davis, 3-4). In this paper I have followed Davis's lead, tracing the social and collective dimensions of African-Ameri-

can music back to its roots in West Africa. I then read Morrison's fiction in this fuller context.

It would, of course, be impossible in a paper of this size to document all the instances in Morrison's novels when characters use music for redemptive purposes. Indeed, her novels encompass three hundred years of American history. As Denise Heinze suggests, the novels are generally set in periods of great importance for African Americans (Heinze, 110); however, they also frequently move back and forth seamlessly over time, in and out of these periods.

Following Heinze's direction, we can arrange the novels in a broad historical outline based on the primary period in which the action takes place. *Beloved*, Morrison's novel set in the earliest time, occurs during slavery and Reconstruction in the South and in a free African-American community near Cincinnati, Ohio. *Sula* and *Jazz* both focus on the period after World War I in the North: *Sula* from the years 1919 to 1941 in Medallion, Ohio, and *Jazz* primarily in 1926 in Harlem. *The Bluest Eye* takes place in 1941, the beginning of the United State's participation in World War II, in Lorain, Ohio. *Song of Solomon*, which occurs primarily in a town bordering the Southern rim of the Great Lakes, begins in 1931 and ends in the early sixties in Southern territory. And *Tar Baby*, Morrison's most contemporary novel, is situated on the Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean during the 1980s.

In this paper I will focus on Morrison's three novels that take place between the two world wars: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz*. The years that these novels encompass, 1919 to 1941, coincide with the period in American history when the mass migrations of African Americans from the South to the North had ended. Significantly, this period was also called the "Jazz Age," which extended roughly from the Armistice of 1918 to the stock market crash of 1929. The Jazz Age is frequently remembered for its increased prosperity, liberated or hedonistic social behavior, and Prohibition and bootleg liquor. Far more importantly for the purpose of this paper, the Jazz Age also introduced many innovative forms of African-American music to

both the white and African-American public. After World War I, the growing popularity of recorded jazz music, the development of commercial radio, and the enthusiasm of the American people for public dancing speeded the assimilation of African-American music into the mainstream of American music. But it retained quite a different meaning in the lives of African Americans, linking them to their West-African heritage.

My examination of the Jazz Age and the decade of the 1930s in Morrison's fiction will focus on the way in which a select group of her characters transmit West-African archetypal cultural and social functions into the American scene, primarily through the vehicle of music. I hope to demonstrate the way in which Morrison's characters manifest and mutate these West-African archetypes to serve their own need to survive not only the conditions of slavery but its pervasive aftermath of racism. In particular, I will focus on the way in which the West-African archetypes resurface in the blues and the way in which Morrison's characters employ the blues to combat discrimination even in the face of what seemed a deliberate plan to deprive them of their West-African culture.

In order to understand how these West-African cultural functions resurface in Morrison's fiction and in the African-American music of the Twenties and Thirties, we need to review a brief history of African-American music and its West-African roots.

The development of African-American music, in particular the way in which remnants of West-African archetypes have survived in different musical forms, provides a good paradigm for the study of African-American literature. Toni Morrison discusses the need for such an approach to the study of African-American literature in her 1989 essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." In this essay she envisions "the development of a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature: one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits" ("Unspeakable," 11). In this paper I will attempt to bring together a number of ethnomusicological studies that focus on the history and culture of African-American music and show the ways in which Toni Morrison has deliberately incorporated these musical and cultural strategies in her fiction. I hope that this type of interdisciplinary study will in part answer Morrison's call for a theory of African-American literature based on its culture, history, and artistic strategies, and will suggest new avenues to accommodate the study of African-American literature in general and Toni Morrison's fiction in particular.

It is important, I think, to note two issues before I turn to the history of African-American music. First, the majority (approximately 90%) of American slaves came from West Africa. Many of the ethnomusicological and literary sources cited in this paper, which discuss the roots of African-American music, refer only to "Africa;" whenever possible I have changed these citations to identify and designate their West-African origin. The second point to remember is that the variations between different West-African countries and tribes, all of whom speak different languages and dialects and have their own customs, including their own music, are immense. Ernest Borneman, who wrote the landmark 1959 ethnomusicological essay on African-American music "The Roots of Jazz," describes some of the parochial

Western misperceptions that exist regarding the vast differences in West-African music. Borneman states:

> The ancient tribal music of West Africa—the music of the coastal belt that stretches from Senegal down to the Gulf of Guinea—differs more profoundly from that of the Berbers in the north or the Bushmen in the South than the music of any two European nations has ever differed in recorded history. To speak of African music as though there were a common denominator between the music of Riff Kabyles, Congo Pygmies and Masai is like talking about American music without trying to distinguish between that of Eskimos, Indians and Pennsylvania Dutch (Borneman, 3).

Despite these differences it is still possible to identify some general cultural characteristics of West-African music that differentiate it from European and American music.

In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison alludes to a number of cultural and social functions that African-American music and fiction can transmit to contemporary African Americans, many of which have been traced to West-African musical sources. Borneman, LeRoi Jones, and John Storm Roberts all agree that seventeenth-century West-African music contained a strong functional and educational component that is still recognized in that music today. Roberts explains that up to a point all music anywhere has a function: to please the gods, or to make work easier, or simply to give pleasure. "Yet," he claims, "there is no doubt that in Africa it is more closely bound up with the details of daily living than in Europe" (Roberts, 5). Borneman lists eight basic types of song that regulated the West-African community's pattern of culture:

1. Songs used by the young men to influence the young women: songs of courtship, songs of challenge, songs of scorn.
2. Songs used by mothers to calm and educate their children: lullabies, play songs, song games.
3. Songs used by older men to prepare the adolescent boys for manhood: initiation songs, legends to perpetuate the history and traditions of the community, epic songs, ballads of famous ancestors.

4. Songs used by religious heads of the community to inspire feelings of mystery, solemnity, awe, or submissiveness.
5. Songs used by chiefs to keep the community under control and preserve its coherence: songs used to arouse common emotions and a sense of joint anticipation.
6. Songs used by the warriors to arouse courage in battle and instill fear in the enemy: battle songs, ballads commemorating past victories, legends of dead heroes.
7. Songs used by priests and medicine men to influence nature: fertility songs, rain songs, songs to hunt or kill, songs to arouse love and heal disease.
8. Songs used by workers to make their tasks easier: work songs to stress the rhythm of labor, group songs to synchronize collectively executed work, team songs sung by one team to challenge and satirize another (Borneman, 3-4).

In Morrison's novels, these types of song seem to be transformed or mutated into a dimension of daily social functions of African-American life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, even though Borneman's divisions may seem specifically West-African, I suggest that all of Borneman's categories can be seen not only in Morrison's novels but in other African-American fiction. Due to the length of this paper I will not examine all eight West-African song categories; however, I will discuss Morrison's portrayal of West-African songs of courtship, battle songs, songs used to preserve community coherence, and work songs.

It should be noted that there are some omissions in Borneman's list, which are attributable to gender exclusion. Davis points out Borneman's "failure to acknowledge the possibility that women also sang songs to influence men... for the societies to which he makes reference had distinct female courtship customs" (Davis, 5). Davis also mentions Borneman's failure to recognize the songs used for the passage from girlhood to womanhood.

Importantly, as is apparent from Borneman's list of activities that music regulates, there is not the division of the arts from social and political life in West Africa that is so characteristic of the West. As Ortiz Walton points out, West-African "art is considered no less or no more important than any other vital aspect of the culture and is not highly specialized" (Walton, 13). Davis also observes that unlike

Western music, West-African music is not employed as an aesthetic instrumentality, external to a social function; rather it is inseparable from the very activity itself (Davis, 6).

Another example of the way in which West-African music is inextricably connected to the activity it accompanies is found in John Storm Roberts's book *Black Music of Two Worlds*. Roberts demonstrates the specificity and intensity of the cultural roles that music performs in West Africa:

> All continents have lullabies for putting babies to sleep, of course, but in the Fon area of Dahomey there is a song children learn to sing on the loss of their first tooth. The Alcan of Ghana have a song of derision aimed at habitual bed-wetters sung at a special ritual designed to cure enuresis. Punishment for wrong doing frequently has its own music: The Akan also have special drums, which are played to accompany a petty thief while he is paraded through town with whatever he stole in his hands, and the Bamoun of Cameroun have some eerie and impressive music to be played when a court official is taken to be hanged (Roberts, 5).

As this excerpt and Borneman's and Davis's song types attest, the examples of the social use of West-African music seem to be endless.

In my study of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz* I have identified a number of West-African archetypal functions of music that appear to have re-emerged in similar forms during the Twenties and Thirties in African-American society. Specifically, in *The Bluest Eye* I identify the heightened acuity to pitch and timbre that occurs in West-African language and music and the educational role of music in West-African societies. In *Sula* I focus on West-African call and response; the West-African songs used to arouse courage in battle; as well as on the lack of moralizing in West-African music. In *Jazz* I explore the importance of drums and rhythm in West-African cultures; the similarities between West-African language and music; and the strong sexual element found in West-African music, and their African-American descendants.

During the period of slavery, music performed a number of essential social

and communicative functions for African Americans. Some functions came directly from West-African society, while others were newly invented to cope with the conditions imposed by slavery. For example, Davis describes the redemptive power that music performed for slaves in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States:

> During the period of slavery, music alone escaped the devastating cultural genocide wrote by the slaveocracy on the lives of Africans who were involuntarily and forcibly transported from their homeland to the shores of North America. While Black people were denied the right to speak in their native tongues, to engage in their traditional religious practices, to build their traditional families and communities, they were able to sing as they toiled in the fields and as they practiced their new found Christian religion. Through the vehicle of song, they were able to preserve their ethnic heritage, even as they were generations removed from their original homeland and perhaps even unaware that their songs bore witness and affirmed their roots (Davis, 4-5).

Davis raises a number of issues that I believe are important for this discussion of Morrison's use of music. First, she makes clear that music was the only art form and communication form that the slaves were allowed to use without restriction. Second, she points out that the cultural genocide that slaves were forced to endure caused their collective cultural memories of West-African "strong functions" to fade with each generation, necessitating new strategies of invention and renewal.

I believe that Morrison documents this phenomenon of the erasure of West-African cultural memory in her fiction. Far more importantly, however, Morrison also demonstrates the way in which her African-American characters attempt to reconstruct vitally-important West-African social and cultural practices, often in peculiar and idiosyncratic ways. For example, in *Beloved*, every Saturday afternoon Baby Suggs sits on a huge flat-sided rock in the Clearing and beckons to the men, women, and children of the town, waiting among the trees, to laugh, dance, and cry because "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" (*Beloved*, 88). In *Tar Baby*, after a picnic lunch with Son, Jadine wanders into a cove of young

trees and sinks up to her knees in the mud. While trapped in the muck she envisions her female ancestors hanging from the trees, admonishing her for denying her West-African heritage, for wanting "to be something other than they were" (*Tar Baby*, 183). These episodes dramatize characters who are almost unconsciously recreating the West-African cultural memories that were forcibly taken away from them when they were enslaved. These rituals and fantasies which suggest West-African origins are often incomprehensible to the characters who engage in them. Unfortunately, these activities are often even more inexplicable to Western critics steeped in a different cultural tradition.

West-African cultural and social musical functions continued to resurface and influence African-American music after slavery was abolished. Borneman identifies three major branches of West-African music that survived in America: work songs, spirituals, and the blues. "The work songs," Borneman suggests, "are most closely related to the African archetype" (Borneman, 10) and thus they are the oldest form of African-American music, or the form that existed first after the slaves' arrival in the United States. John Storm Roberts points out that "the heyday of the collective work song in the United States was the period of slavery, and not only because more people were nearer to their African background [but because] the nature of plantation work... was frequently team work" (Roberts, 141). In *Beloved*, Morrison presents an example of the role of work songs. In the tenth chapter, which describes Paul D's humiliating and nearly fatal experience on the prison chain gang, Morrison evokes the way in which the prisoners utilized music to survive:

> With a sledge hammer in his hands and Hi Man's lead, the men got through. They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the

line, rain and rocking chairs. And they beat (*Beloved*, 108).

In this passage, Morrison includes all the cultural functions that Borneman ascribes to a West-African work song in his analysis of the ways song regulated the West-African community's pattern of culture. The song stresses the rhythm of labor to synchronize the chain gang's collectively-executed work, challenges each prisoner to "get through" the tedious and backbreaking labor, and codes the words and rhythms so that the overseer could not understand their meaning.

West-African music also endured in the United States in the form of spirituals, "the first original songs created by Protestant Negro slaves on American soil" (Borneman, 13). John Storm Roberts observes that "Negro spirituals began to filter into the general American consciousness just before Emancipation, a progress that was highlighted by a spectacularly successful US and European tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the early 1870s" (Roberts, 160-161). In these spirituals African-Americans altered existing Euro-American hymns, enriching them with West-African musical practices, or archetypes, they remembered or recreated. Morrison is keenly aware of the salvific powers of spirituals in her novels. For example, in *Sula* when Tar Baby sings "In the Sweet By-and-By" at Wednesday-night prayer meetings, those listening to him "wept and thought very graphically of their own imminent deaths" (*Sula*, 40). During Aunt Jimmy's funeral in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison elevates the call-and-response patterns of the preacher and mourners to Greek tragedy. At the funeral, partly through spirituals, the participants express "grief over the waste of life, the stunned wonder at the ways of God, and the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard" (*The Bluest Eye*, 113). And in *Beloved* Baby Suggs restores a sense of peace in her daughter-in-law Sethe when she instructs her to follow the words of a spiritual. Baby Suggs pleads:

> 'Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield.' And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would. Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one

by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below (*Beloved*, 86).

The third major type of West-African music that persisted in America were the blues, the form of music upon which I focus most closely in my examination of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz*. The historical study of the blues is rife with controversy, particularly about when exactly this type of music began. The disagreement, according to John Storm Roberts, is caused in part "because few people can agree exactly where other forms—the holler, in particular—end, and the blues begin" (Roberts, 179). In addition, those African Americans who first performed the blues did not call that music the blues. "The word [blues]," explains Roberts, "applied to music, began creeping into use around the first decade of the twentieth century" (Roberts, 180). Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that the blues can be traced to two sources, which Martha Bayles describes as: "Afro-American religion and ritual, including spirituals, ring shouts, hollers, work chants, sermons, and toasts; and to early forms of American popular culture, including plantation music, minstrel 'coon songs,' and popular ballads" (Bayles, 12). Like spirituals, the blues blended West-African musical elements with existing American musical forms to create a new form of African-American music.

The holler, according to Borneman, was "directly borrowed from African sources to serve as a means of communication between slave workers" (Borneman, 13). Ortiz Walton further explains that the holler was used on slave plantations by the muleskinners or teamsters who had to travel the entire area of their master's property, unlike the average field slave who was confined to one area. In order to let the overseer know where he was, the teamster would sing or holler, his voice carrying from plantation to plantation.

Frederick Douglass, in his book *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, first published in 1845, describes the effects these hollers created: "The teamsters would make the wood reverberate with their notes. These were not always merry. In these bursts of rapturous feelings, there was even a tinge of deep melancholy" (Douglass,

81). As Walton points out, Douglass captures the essence of the blues in his account, for he has circumscribed the seemingly contradictory elements of rapture and melancholy. Walton explains that

> This interpretation argues against the view, held by most Western critics of black music, that the blues is an exclusively sad music. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is a music of this earth and of all its paradoxes, where both its joys and pains are synthesized and resolved into an emotional-spiritual unity that helps make possible life's continuance (Walton, 29).

Clearly, the rapturous feelings that the teamster creates and his listeners experience are cathartic. Also evident is the fact that this need for redemption or catharsis did not disappear after slavery ended. Rather, persecution and discrimination directed toward African Americans continued to persist in more subtle yet equally heinous ways, making the need for rapture as an antidote to melancholy a continuing necessity for African Americans. These blues elements of rapture and melancholy seem deeply rooted in Toni Morrison's fiction, especially in a select group of her characters who, through music, are uniquely able to transcend the chaos that racism has created in their lives.

After slavery the improvisatory nature of the holler continued to influence the blues. As Roberts suggests,

> [the] blues were an improvised music in which singers created either their own song or new versions of old songs by impromptu imagination, free association, and the use of what the folklorists call 'floating' verses (lines that crop up time and again in a wide variety of songs), for example, 'I'm a poor boy, long ways from home,' 'Laughing just to keep from crying,' and 'I got a woman, she's six foot tall/Sleeps in the kitchen with her head in the hall' (Roberts, 181).

Improvisation was—and continues to be—an essential component of the musical structure and lyrics of the blues.

After Emancipation improvisation also performed an important educational function for African Americans faced with the task of rebuilding their families and communities, which had been forbidden under slavery. Angela Davis describes the

way in which the blues served as a socializing tool for African Americans when their new-found freedom presented them with a number of new problems. Davis maintains that the industrial capitalism that eventually replaced slavery produced entirely new modes of oppression for the former slaves. According to Davis, the blues were created to address "the new troubles Black people faced in a world that still refused to accept them as equals, [and] a society that thrived on the systematic exploitation and discrimination meted out to the former slaves" (Davis, 11).

The communal function of the blues, simultaneously formulating and transmitting ideas on how to rebuild fractured communities and social structures, has also been noted by Ralph Ellison in his collection of essays *Shadow and Act*. Ellison also discusses the elements of rapture and melancholy, or tragedy and comedy, inherent in the blues, as well as the blues' communal nature:

> The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences. This is a group experience shared by many Negros (Ellison, *Shadow*, 256).

I have identified four characters in Morrison's novels—Claudia MacTeer, Shadrack, Alice Manfred, and Violet Trace—who possess the extraordinary ability to engage the rapturous or salvific essence of the blues to transcend and triumph over their own tragic conditions. Furthermore, these characters are often able to transmit these healing, restorative powers of music to the other individuals in their communities, fulfilling the communal and educational roles that Davis and Ellison have identified in the blues. I suggest that through this transmission of cultural information, these characters, who I call "blues women" and "blues men," act as cultural emissaries, passing on to other individuals in the novels not only the redemptive powers of the music popular during the Jazz Age and 1930s, but also by connecting

other individuals to the vital cultural archetypes in their West-African heritage. I argue that in this way Morrison indeed accomplishes the goal that she outlines in her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," of successfully transmitting "certain very strong functions" in her fiction.

Blues Women and Blues Men

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison provides a description of a blues man by combining a number of floating blues verses:

> Bluesman. Black and bluesman. Black therefore blue man.
> Everybody knows your name.
> Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man.
> Everybody knows your name (*Jazz*, 119).

While it is certainly true that in the predominantly African-American community of Harlem in which *Jazz* takes place, nearly every resident can identify a blues man or blues woman, these characters continue to elude the grasp of some critics. As Ellison suggests, the blues "express a profound sense of life shared by many African Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes" (Ellison, 256). Consequently, that is why everybody in *Jazz* knows the name of the blues man. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will identify some of the characteristics of blues women and blues men to further illuminate Morrison's purposeful rendering of these characters in her fiction.

Houston Baker, Jr., in his book *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, identifies a number of blues men and blues women by analyzing "... moments in Afro-American discourse when personae, protagonists, autobiographical narrators, or literary critics successfully negotiate an obdurate 'economics of slavery' and achieve resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity" (*Blues*, 13). These moments, according to Baker, and the successful analyses of these moments, provide "cogent examples of the blues matrix at work" (*Blues*, 13). Also essential to Baker's analysis of blues women and blues men are the economic issues that underlie all aspects of slavery. In Baker's view,

> ... all Afro-American creativity is conditioned by (and constitutes a component of) a historical discourse which privileges certain economic terms. The creative individual (the *black subject*), must, there-

> fore, whether he self-consciously wills it or not, come to terms with 'commercial deportation' and the 'economics of slavery.' The subject's very inclusion in an *Afro-American* traditional discourse is, in fact, contingent on an encounter with such privileged economic signs of Afro-American discourse (*Blues*, 38-39).

Baker's insistence that economic issues are the primary motivating and defining characteristics of blues men and blues women, whom, he claims, successfully negotiate "the blues matrix at work," is incomplete in my view. Aesthetic and social factors play an equally-important role in the blues, and these issues, I believe, must be addressed. In addition, Baker's analysis looks backward only to the Middle Passage, ignoring the earlier West-African heritage that deeply influenced, and continues to influence, the blues.

Likewise, LeRoi Jones's controversial study of blues women and blues men, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, also falls short of providing an accurate description of these individuals because of his Nationalist political thrust. While Jones does explore the West-African antecedents to the blues, his political emphasis ignores other important factors that influence the blues. Ralph Ellison, in a review of *Blues People*, criticizes Jones for ignoring the aesthetic qualities of the blues:

> the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice.... It is unfortunate that Jones thought it necessary to ignore the aesthetic nature of the blues in order to make his ideological point, for he might have come much closer had he considered the blues not as politics but as art (*Shadow*, 257).

The four characters who I have identified as blues people in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz*—Claudia MacTeer, Shadrack, Alice Manfred, and Violet Trace—do indeed seem to have come to terms with "commercial deportation" and the "economics of slavery" in their development as blues people. Instead of internalizing their rage over these economic inequities—injustices which indeed have shaped their very existence as African Americans—and instead of assuming the characteristics of impotence and muteness that their oppressors would accept as

their only appropriate response, given their economic history as chattel, these characters are able to create both language and actions that transcend the silence that engulfs and destroys other characters in these novels.

In Morrison's two earliest novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the blues people, Claudia and Shadrack, are very clearly paired with their foils, Pecola Breedlove and Plum Peace, both of whom are destroyed not only by their inability to come to terms with the "economics of slavery," but by their inability to articulate and transcend the chaos that racism has created in their lives. In Morrison's most recent novel *Jazz*, however, the distinctions between the blues people, Alice Manfred and Violet Trace, and the other characters are more ambiguous. Nearly all the characters in *Jazz*, as I mentioned earlier, can identify a blues man and a blues woman, and likewise nearly every character seems to possess some type of urban sophistication, which makes them sensitive to the transcendental, redemptive powers that music creates in their lives.

These four blues characters also fulfill Jones's criteria for a blues person, demonstrating the ability to empower themselves through political protest, often inspired and formulated through music. The most obvious examples of blues-inspired community-based political resistance are Shadrack's National Suicide Day Parade in *Sula* and in the parade held in *Jazz* to commemorate the 1917 riots in East St. Louis. Equally-significant are the personal acts of political protest that are often motivated by and articulated through music in Morrison's novels. For Claudia, Shadrack, Alice, and Violet the blues provide a language through which they can create a new definition of themselves and of their worlds. Through courageous and creative acts of repossession, these four blues characters not only establish their own selfhood in a culture that seems bent on denying them this power or identity, but through example their personal lives become prototypes for their collective communities. In *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz* the very acts of personal and communal reclamation that these four characters initiate play a fundamental role, shaping and

determining much of the subsequent action and plot.

The language and music that these blues characters use to reinvent themselves and their worlds is often riddled with paradox. Most notable, I suggest, are the contradictory elements of rapture and melancholy, comedy and tragedy, sweetness and pain. These elements, which have dominated the lives of African Americans since slavery, have been deeply embedded in blues and jazz lyrics, and pervade the language and consciences of Morrison's characters. I have also examined the subversive or oppositional qualities of the blues and jazz, qualities which are found in the lyrics, rhythms, and performances of this music, and which often contain a strong sexual element. As I will demonstrate, these subversive, and oftentimes erotic, qualities frequently cause fear and misunderstanding among Western audiences. I also hope to demonstrate that the misinterpretation that plagues much Western analysis of African-American music and literature can be corrected if we take into account the historical and social conditions that gave rise to the blues and jazz.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I suggest that these blues characters in Morrison's novels embody Ellison's aesthetic criteria of the blues by employing music to transcend racial injustice, by tapping into and re-creating their West-African heritage. In mysterious and often unexplainable ways, Claudia, Shadrack, Alice, and Violet are able to revise and transpose into an African-American setting the archetypal functions of West-African music. In particular, these characters reinvent in their contemporary African-American eras the inseparable link that exists in West-African culture between music and the social functions it accompanies. These four characters seem to possess the ability to draw upon a creative power that many Western readers have misinterpreted because that power stems from a well-defined West-African culture of which most Western critics are not aware. The blues draws directly upon this very specific West-African culture.

Music plays an integral role in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Jazz*, shaping key

events in human life in these novels. Many of the actions can be traced back to West-African cultural traditions; many are underscored by musical clues or signals. I will now turn to three of Morrison's novels, examining a number of these musical sign-posts to illustrate how the reinvented West-African cultural functions may provide a means of redemption not only for Morrison's characters but also for her readers.

Truth in Timbre: *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, tells the relentlessly tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, living in the African-American community of Lorain, Ohio, who, at the age of eleven is raped by her father and becomes pregnant. The narrator Claudia MacTeer relates the story years later, looking back at 1941 when she was nine years old. Claudia reveals the denouement on the first page—that Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, is dead and that Pecola's baby died also. Claudia concludes her prologue by claiming, "There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (*Bluest Eye*, 9).

In this section I will suggest that Claudia is a blues woman who unstintingly delves into and then relates the horrific events that led to Pecola's sexual assault. In her role as a narrator, Claudia acts as a witness to the redemption that can be claimed by those who "take refuge in how." In this way, the entire novel *The Bluest Eye* can be seen as a blues song or blues ritual, which according to Martha Bayles, "involves both performer and audience in a communal re-enactment of extreme emotional states" (Bayles, 14). Bayles claims that the purpose of the blues ritual is to return from these states—to survive trouble, not succumb to it, and in her role as a blues woman Claudia does survive the past, teaching us "that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (*Bluest Eye*, 24). Claudia's development as a blues women is greatly influenced by her mother who imparts to Claudia and her sister Frieda certain legacies of their West-African culture, particularly through music, that enable the young girls to survive the harsh realities of their youth. Pecola's parents, on the other hand, internalize the tenets of racism, irrevocably separating themselves from their heritage. Consequently, they are not able to teach Pecola and her brother Sammy to love themselves and employ their imaginations against racism. Pecola as a result, does not survive trouble, but succumbs to it and "step[s] over into mad-

ness" (*Bluest Eye*, 159).

When we first encounter Mrs. MacTeer and her two daughters in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison presents an intriguing example of the way in which music performs critical cultural functions in an African-American setting that echo their West-African archetypal origins. In particular, the similarities between West-African language and music seem to re-emerge in this scene when Claudia and Frieda are washing Mason jars and the girls overhear their mother chatting with her friends. Claudia describes the way she perceives the adult women's conversation, not in terms of the words the women speak, but instead by listening to the music their voices make:

> Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch for their faces, their hands, and listen for truth in their timbre (*Bluest Eye*, 16).

According to John Storm Roberts, "the intimate connection between speech and melody in West-African music arises partly from the fact that so many West-African languages are tonal" (Roberts, 189). And, because of these similarities between West-African music and language, West-African "children learn to discern subtleties of rhythm, melody, and tone color as parts of their language" (Borneman, 6). Clearly, from Claudia's description of this conversation, she too is able to discern the musical subtleties in her mother's language even though she cannot understand the meanings of all her words.

Barbara Christian has identified these West-African musical archetypes in *The Bluest Eye*. In her view,

> the novel is sound ... is truth in timbre, as Claudia, Frieda, Pecola, all of us learn our truths not in what is said but from the pitch, the tim-

> bre, of our society's sound. Language as tonality and as dance, African linguistic characteristics, are all at the center of this book's truth as Morrison refuses to compose her characters' world in a linear order, for that is not the pattern of sound (Christian, 151).

Central to Christian's insight into the "African linguistic characteristics" in Morrison's work, is the musical concept of timbre. Timbre, or the characteristic quality, or color, of sound, makes it possible, for example, for us to distinguish the difference between the sound of a viola and a cello or the song of a cardinal and a robin.

The ability to distinguish differences in timbre and pitch is a far more advanced skill in West-African languages and music than in the West. Pitch and timbre acuity and differentials, according to Borneman, play essential roles in West-African language and music, differentiating them from their Western counterparts:

> When we want to stress a word, we raise our voice—that is to say, we go up in pitch. But in those African languages where a change of pitch on any given syllable may alter the meaning of the entire word you are left with only one device to emphasize your point: timbre. You can alter the tone color, the voice production, the vibrato of the syllable you wish to stress. This combination of pitch and timbre in African language is what philologists call 'significant tone.' It has had the most profound effect on the history of American Negro music (Borneman, 6).

I suggest that Morrison is keenly aware of these traditions—such as the similarities between West-African music and language, as well as the way in which these West-African cultural traditions have been transformed into African-American music—and has deliberately incorporated these characteristics not only in *The Bluest Eye* but in all of her fiction.

In *The Bluest Eye* Claudia has learned not only the truth in the timbre of her society's sound but she has also clearly learned from her mother the paradoxical way in which African-American music, particularly the blues, can contain both elements of comedy and tragedy. She demonstrates her childlike understanding of the blues when she describes her mother singing about the hard times, the bad

times, and the "somebody-done-gone-and-left-me-times." Claudia recalls that "misery colored by the greens and the blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (*Bluest Eye*, 24). In this excerpt, Claudia echoes Frederick Douglass's description of the contradictory elements of rapture and melancholy joined in the blues. Her understanding of these antithetical elements gives rise to her development as a blues woman, enabling her to conclude that "since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (*Bluest Eye*, 9).

While the West-African cultural function of "truth in timbre" has surely been transformed into contemporary African-American practice, Toni Morrison explores the consequences when African Americans do not receive instruction from their elders. In contrast to Claudia's ability to distinguish the true emotions in her mother's conversations by listening to the sound of her voice rather than to her words, the protagonist in Morrison's second novel *Sula* is not privy to this same acuity. When Sula is twelve years old, she overhears her mother Hannah talking casually with her friends about the problems of child rearing. When Hannah's friend says that she cannot say that love is exactly what she feels toward her child, Hannah replies: 'Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference.' (*Sula*, 57). Sula, we are told, "only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs" (*Sula*, 57). The consequences of Sula's misunderstanding of her mother's love are suggested throughout the rest of the novel, most notably when Sula watches Hannah burn in a canning accident, while standing on the back porch without trying to intervene or search for assistance.

Morrison presents a far more tragic scenario about an African-American child who does not know about her cultural heritage in her picture of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Unlike Claudia, who learns from her mother to discern the truth in timbre of her society's sound and also that the pain of the African-American predicament is not only endurable but it is also sweet, Pecola receives no instruction or cultural tools

from her parents that would enable her to transcend the racial hatred that eventually destroys her. Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly, pass on to Pecola and her brother Sammy a culture of hate instead of a cultural awareness of their West-African heritage partly because they never learned themselves about their rich cultural traditions. Instead, both Pauline and Cholly have internalized racism and truly believe that they are "poor and black... [and] ugly" (*Bluest Eye*, 34).

In contrast to the MacTeer household where "love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup eased up... everywhere in that house" (*Bluest Eye*, 14), the Breedlove household, or storefront, exudes the family's self-loathing. "No one," Morrison repeats, "could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (*Bluest Eye*, 34). Within this environment of self-hatred and poverty, the Breedloves attempt to empower themselves by preying on each other. In particular, Mrs. Breedlove devises a blues-like ritual in her daily quarrels with Cholly. These squabbles, which quickly degenerate into brutal fights "with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flatiron sail[ing] toward Cholly's head" (*Bluest Eye*, 37), provide for Pauline the same catharsis and communal re-enactment of extreme emotional states that singing the blues accomplishes without physical violence for Mrs. MacTeer:

> The tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels. They gave substance to the minutes and hours otherwise dim and unrecalled. They relieved the tiresomeness of poverty, gave grandeur to the dead rooms. In these violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine, she could display the style and imagination of what she believed was her own true self (*Bluest Eye*, 36).

However, unlike a blues ritual, in which the purpose is to return from these states—to survive trouble, not succumb to it—these quarrels only intensified and bred more self hatred among Pauline, Cholly, Sammy, and Pecola. Clearly, the creativity and imagination that Pauline invested in these fights did not enable her or her children to transcend their predicament, rather they merely allowed her to hate someone

other than herself.

In Cholly Breedlove we find an exception to Morrison's statement that "bestial treatment of human beings never produces a race of beasts." Cholly seems to be the most bestial African-American character Morrison has created. While he belongs to Morrison's much-studied group of "free" male characters (including Ajax from *Sula*, Guitar from *Song of Solomon*, and Son in *Tar Baby*), he is by far the most evil of these men. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison explores why Cholly hates his wife so deeply; she describes the bestial treatment to which he was subjected as a child, which ultimately causes him to pour out on Pauline the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires:

> Hating her, he could leave himself intact. When he was still very young, Cholly had been surprised in some bushes by two white men while he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl. The men had shone a flashlight right on his behind. He had stopped, terrified. They chuckled. The beam of the flashlight did not move. 'Go on,' they said. 'Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good.'... For some reason Cholly had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl (*Bluest Eye*, 37).

This hatred that Cholly projects onto the little girl, which years later he attaches to Pauline and ultimately onto Pecola, is rooted in his thinly disguised anger at himself. And Cholly's hatred of himself was created in part by the two white men who so clearly despised the young African-American boy they tortured in the woods. Music, Morrison suggests, is one powerful alternative to this endless cycle of hatred. Cholly, however, does not have the inner resources or support to become a blues man.

Although Cholly does not possess the knowledge of the redemptive powers of music, Morrison paradoxically insists that the pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent in the head of a musician. Morrison explains that

> Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life.... Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he

> knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity (*Bluest Eye*, 125).

Catherine Rainwater posits a possible explanation for this apparent contradiction between Cholly's bestial behavior and the redemptive possibilities of music and the musician. Rainwater claims that

> Despairing of language to render truth, the narrators often hope that some other medium, especially music, will be more successful.... Thus Morrison suggests that reading is much like Claudia and Frieda's earlier-mentioned experience of listening to adult conversation and grasping only the 'edges,' the 'timbre.' Her narrators' apparent distrust of language implies Morrison's own view of narrative as obstructing a more elemental encounter with experience (Rainwater, 106).

Based on my examination of the role of music in *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison's other novels, I would argue that Morrison is not suggesting that music provides a more "successful" medium than language to elucidate the African-American predicament. Rather, in her texts music enriches the descriptive power of language. In light of the West-African cultural heritage that informs Morrison's fiction, I would also suggest that music and language cannot be separated and compared; as in African-American culture, they are inextricably combined. Consequently, when Rainwater devalues Claudia and Frieda's perceptual acuity by claiming that they grasp "only" the edges and timbre of the adult conversation, she is misunderstanding and misrepresenting the young girls' perceptual skills, which indeed seem more sophisticated than the listening skills of most Western (white) children.

Rainwater also suggests in her essay that the different contributions of popular and high art affect the ethical formation of Morrison's characters:

> Morrison develops ideas about art at a thematic level.... First, her novels emphasize the magical power of art (indeed several of her characters possess magical powers). Like magic, art reveals a destructive as well as a constructive use. The destructive power resides in Morrison's characters, particularly in seductive popular art such as blues songs and movies. Popular art invites people to enter fantasy worlds where they may seek escape from reality, or they might learn, inappropriately, to apply the interpretive norms of fiction to life

(Rainwater, 98).

My primary argument with Rainwater's analysis centers on her grouping of blues songs and movies together under the category of "seductive popular art" forms. I believe that Rainwater is correct in identifying certain movies in Morrison's novels that perpetuate destructive stereotypes. For example, Pauline Breedlove learns at the movies about the Western (white) idea of romantic love and physical beauty, both of which Morrison describes as "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (*Bluest Eye*, 97). Other female characters in Morrison's novels—such as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Hagar in *The Song of Solomon*, and Jadine in *Tar Baby*—have also embraced these Western European ideals of love and beauty and Morrison demonstrates that the emulation of such ideals leads to horrible consequences, including death. Further, in my reading of Morrison's novels, I have not been able to identify a single instance in which a character is "seduced" by the blues to enter a fantasy world. Rather, the blues' function is to help African-Americans survive reality, not escape from or succumb to it. Mary Ellison also has argued that the blues are not a form of escapism, but that "the essential motive behind the best blues song is the acquisition of insight, wisdom... [about] the immediacy of life, the nature of man, and human survival" (Ellison, 14). I suggest that Rainwater does not sufficiently distinguish between Western and West-African art forms in her analysis of music in Morrison's novels. While Morrison's characters sense a cultural uncertainty and are handicapped by the absence of a reliable cultural history, a number of them do discover a constructive, appropriate model from the West-African-inspired blues on which to reconstruct and reconfigure their difficult lives.

Michael Awkward in his essay, "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," presents an alternative interpretation of Morrison's musical intentions in this text, a more satisfactory commentary than Rainwater's discussion of the destructive powers of popular music in the ethical formation of Cholly Breedlove. Awkward argues that Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*

presents a purposefully-feminist revision of Ralph Ellison's depiction of incest in his novel *Invisible Man*. The Breedlove family, according to Awkward, is a parody of Ellison's incestuous Trueblood clan. The similarities between the two families are obvious, including their last names, their desperate economic circumstances, the fact that they were forced to sleep in dangerously close quarters, and the similarities between the daughters, each of whom sexually excites her father. In *Invisible Man*, Jim Trueblood rapes his daughter, claiming that it occurred during a dream. After Trueblood assaults his daughter he leaves the house and contemplates his actions. He "thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I guilty and how I ain't guilty" (*Invisible*, 65). He finally absolves himself through the blues:

> Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just started singin'... All I know is I ends up singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too (*Invisible*, 65-66).

Awkward incorporates into his discussion Houston Baker, Jr.'s, interpretation of the Trueblood incest scene in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. In Baker's interpretation, Jim Trueblood effectively uses the blues to transcend "the negativity of his own act" (*Blues*, 188). According to Baker,

> In translating his tragedy into the vocabulary and semantics of the blues and, subsequently, into the electrifying expression of his narrative, Trueblood realizes that he is not so changed by catastrophe that he must condemn, mortify, or redefine his essential self (*Blues*, 190).

According to Baker, Trueblood is not responsible for the sexual assault of his daughter. Rather, he is to be seen as a laudable victim, one who is able to rise above *"his* tragedy" and the catastrophe in his life. Awkward, however, suggests that:

> [Baker's] sensitivity to feminist concerns is missing from his reading of Ellison. Instead Baker's essay mirrors the strategies by which Trueblood (and Trueblood's creator) validate male perceptions of incest while, at the same time silencing the female voice or relegating it to the evaluative periphery (Awkward, 63).

Awkward suggests that "in refiguring Trueblood in the character of Cholly Breedlove," Morrison "surrounds her creation with images consistent with Baker's conception of the Ellisonian character as majestic Afro-American vernacular artist free from social restraint" (Awkward, 65). (It should be noted that Baker's "vernacular artist" is another label for his term "blues man.") Thus Morrison is following in the footsteps of Ralph Ellison by describing Cholly Breedlove through the eyes of a musician. Awkward explains that "only an Afro-American artist with the blues sensibility that Baker argues for Trueblood can organize and transform into meaningfully unified expression the utter chaos of Cholly's life" (Awkward, 65).

While many similarities exist between Morrison's depiction of Cholly and Ellison's characterization of Trueblood, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison provides the literary world a new look at African-American oppression, focusing on the child as victim instead of the victimized African-American male blues man. Awkward states that:

> Morrison writes her way into the Afro-American literary tradition by bringing to the foreground the effects of incest for female victims in direct response to Ellison's refusal to consider them seriously. So while the victim of incest in both novels ultimately occupy similar asocial, silent positions in their respective communities, Morrison explicitly details Pecola's tragic and painful journey, while Ellison, in confining Matty Lou to the periphery, suggests that her perspective contains for him 'no compelling significance'(Awkward, 66).

Awkward makes clear that Morrison is writing in a long line of African-Americans who have recorded the role of blues men *and* women. Morrison has added the female point of view to the African-American literary canon, a view dismissed or silenced by earlier writers.

Thus we see in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* not only the revisionary nature of her treatment of Dick and Jane primers, which many critics have noted, but also a revision of Ellison's and Baker's concept of blues men. By presenting a poetic representation of the truth that Pecola experiences, Morrison adds a crucial feminist

component to the concept of blues people. And while Pecola's experience is finally recorded, she herself, for reasons already mentioned, is not a blues woman. The true blues woman in *The Bluest Eye* is Claudia, who concludes her story by describing Pecola's fate:

> We saw her sometimes, Frieda and I... The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear.... She stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us (*Bluest Eye*, 158-159).

Although Claudia realizes at the end of the novel that it would have been impossible for her as a nine-year-old girl to change the events that led to Pecola's destruction, she does achieve a sense of grace through her retelling of Pecola's story. As she explains:

> And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land of our town (*Bluest Eye*, 160).

In her role as a narrator, Claudia is able to understand the events that led to Pecola's madness, to understand that she "did not plant the seeds too deeply," that self hatred and the internalization of racism led to Pecola's madness, and that Pecola was not gifted with the same West-African archetypal consciousness that Claudia possessed. And ultimately, we as readers of the blues song that Claudia recounts in *The Bluest Eye* can also act as witnesses to the redemption that can be claimed by those "who take refuge in how."

Shadrack: Blues Man and Creative Outlaw

The main events in Toni Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1974)—except for a brief prologue and the "1965" coda—occur in relatively straightforward chronological order in nine chapters, titled "1919" to "1941." The events in the chapters occur roughly every two years—with a ten year lapse between 1927 and 1937. Another unifying theme of these chapters is the presence of Shadrack and his National Suicide Day celebration, introduced in the first sentence of the first "1919" chapter and the main focus of the final sentence of the last "1941" chapter. Shadrack, who was the founder and for many years the only celebrant of National Suicide Day, thus frames the primary story of the friendship between two girls, Sula Peace and Nel Wright.

In this section I will examine the West-African archetypes that in some ways led to and even predicted Shadrack's role as a blues man in *Sula*. I will also consider the social and historical impact of World War I and how Shadrack, as an African-American blues man, was able to rally against it and ultimately survive. Clearly, Shadrack is a blues artist, a creative outlaw, whose National Suicide Day takes charge of the images and instruments of death in order to create humanity out of chaos. Other members of the community lack his resources for self-renewal. Plum Peace, for example, another World War I veteran in *Sula*, embraces chaos, which leads to his downfall. I hope to demonstrate by his creation of himself as a blues man, Shadrack's personal life becomes emblematic of the possibilities for the collective community.

It is important to note that originally *Sula* began with the sentence "Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with National Suicide Day" (*Sula*, 7), giving emphasis to the odd musical ritual Shadrack invents to save himself. In her essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Litera-

ture," Morrison explains her later addition of this prologue, a strategy to which she believed she was forced to resort in "trying to accommodate the mere fact of writing about, for and out of black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream 'white' culture" ("Unspeakable," 26). The prologue, written from the point of view of a stranger, the "valley man," describes the African-American neighborhood that was called the Bottom despite the fact that it was located in the hills above the town of Medallion, and how the Bottom originally got started because of a "nigger joke." Morrison claims that she "despise[s] much of this beginning" ("Unspeakable," 24). And in later years—Morrison started writing *Sula* in 1969—she "certainly... would not need (or feel the need for)... the short section that now opens *Sula*." ("Unspeakable," 23). Morrison goes on to state that:

> The difference my preferred (original) beginning would have made would be calling greater attention to the traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people in particular, and throwing into relief the creative, if outlawed, determination to survive it whole ("Unspeakable," 26).

Morrison's hindsight regarding the prologue to *Sula*, and her regret that she had not emphasized more strongly African-American's creative determination to survive traumatic displacement whole, underscores a fundamental objective for her use of music in her novels. The trauma that African Americans experienced during and after World War I was only one more instance in their history of displacements, a history that began in fact with their forced relocation from West Africa to North America's shores. Music presents a creative conduit through which African-Americans cannot only function but also make their fractured lives whole.

Shadrack is a character who with limited self-awareness yet with the utmost determination is able to provide an example to the entire community of the Bottom of the cultural tools available to overcome the limits of racism. He reinvents himself; he invents an annual parade to control and defeat the power of death he has witnessed in battle.

Morrison's portrayal of Shadrack as a creative outlaw is clarified when viewed within the context of the political and social fallout of World War I on African Americans' lives. LeRoi Jones in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* provides a good context for interpreting Shadrack's response to "this most wasteful capitalist war," although it should be noted that a number of writers have critized Jones for perpetuating an overtly-political agenda in his study of the blues. Jones maintains that World War I rapidly changed African Americans' views of themselves and of their roles as United States as well as international citizens. He believes that the war was a fundamental force in producing the "modern American Negro" in the early part of the twentieth century:

> The war proposed to the masses of Negroes that the world was indeed much more than America... when Negroes went into the services in their special black units... there was a sense of actual participation in the affairs and fortunes of the country that was heightened by the recognition these black troops received in various parts of Europe, France notably. After the war, the returning soldiers with their tales of Europe and its white people so like but so very unlike the American whites caused a great deal of open resentment among Negroes about the racially restrictive social mores of American life (Jones, 112).

To Jones, World War I made clear that the social inequities of American life were not universal but intrinsic to America. In addition, because of this new knowledge, "these social inequities suffered by the black man could for the first time be looked at somewhat objectively by Negroes themselves as an *evil* and not merely as their eternal *lot*" (Jones, 113). As a result of this recognition, African Americans organized the first widespread resistance against racial injustice in the form of race riots and the appearance of groups like Marcus Garvey's black nationalist organization, which advocated that African Americans return to Africa. In addition, vast numbers of African Americans migrated from the South during this time for better economic opportunities in the North, believing that in the North they would be free of the Jim Crow laws that continued to limit their opportunities in the South.

Toni Morrison is equally-aware of the impact of the war on African-American

culture. She presents a haunting description in her most recent novel *Jazz* of a formal, public display of African-American anger in a 1917 New York City parade, commemorating the deaths of over two hundred African Americans during the East St. Louis riots. The parade consists solely of silent African-American men and women marching slowly to the rhythm of drums. Morrison describes how the African Americans' involvement in World War I precipitated the riots:

> Some said the rioters were disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the YMCA, over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honor. Others said they were whites terrified by the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live (*Jazz*, 57).

In contrast to the rioters in *Jazz*, Shadrack, in *Sula*, demonstrates considerable creativity in his response to his stunning army experiences. In December, 1917, we learn that Shadrack and his company were caught in shellfire in an unidentified field in France. During his first encounter with the enemy Shadrack watched as the face of a soldier near him was shot off, while the body of the headless soldier "ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back" (*Sula*, 8). Shadrack then spent a year in a veteran's hospital, only eight days of which he fully recollects, suffering from post-war traumatic symptoms. When Shadrack is released from the hospital, Morrison describes his fear and the loss of identity he suffers while trying to assimilate into civilian life. Morrison's introductory portrait of Shadrack consists mostly of negatives, describing the items and qualities that Shadrack lacks:

> Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do..."(*Sula*, 12).

It is interesting to note that Morrison begins her list of negatives with "no past, no

language, no tribe, no source..." In fact most African Americans even without Shadrack's experience did not possess any of these items to link them with their West-African heritage.

During Shadrack's wagon ride back to Medallion, he begins his metamorphosis into a blues man, recovering many of the losses listed earlier. He reinvents his identity, his tribe, his language, or at least a way to communicate, and he creates something to occupy his time:

> In the back of the wagon, supported by sacks of squash and hills of pumpkins, Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody would get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day (*Sula*, 14).

From this inauspicious arrival into Medallion, riding in the back of a produce wagon, Shadrack not only began sorting out his past but conceived of his program to abolish fear for himself and for the townspeople of the Bottom. Shadrack's return to Medallion on a squash-filled wagon seems to bear an ironic resemblance to the Biblical arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey. The humble arrivals of both Shadrack and Jesus, along with the messianic and religious symbols and themes in this scene in *Sula*, suggest the claims of redemption that both propose for their followers.

Houston Baker, Jr., in his book, *Workings of the Spirit*, compares Morrison's Shadrack with a very different Biblical character, Shadrach in *Daniel*, iii. Baker claims that Morrison reverses the Bible's characterization of Shadrack and that the "ironic resemblance that Morrison's antihero bears to the Biblical Shadrach lies in his seeming idolatry before the power of death, while the Shadrach of the book of *Daniel* is condemned by the king for his refusal to worship the golden image" (*Workings*, 228).

Baker tempers his analysis when he suggests that insofar as Morrison's Shadrack is a partisan of an "ordering ritual," he consequently does construct an alternative to the capitalist disorder of war.

I believe Baker minimizes the cultural and symbolic importance of Shadrack's National Suicide Day, or "ordering ritual," as he describes it. First, Shadrack cannot be classified so easily as an antihero; he shows great courage in his reconstruction of himself after his horrifying experience in the war. Shadrack's physical and mental characteristics might lead a reader to consider him a prophet, coming out of the wilderness: his wild eyes, long matted hair, and thunderous voice, but he also has a propensity to be drunk, loud and obscene. Still, when a character tries mightily to help his or her fellow citizens to survive also, then certainly he should not be labeled as an antihero, however peculiar his strategies.

I also believe that Baker is mistaken in assuming that Morrison's Shadrack idolizes the power of death and thus is an ironic double of the Biblical Shadrach. On the contrary, I believe that Shadrack *refuses* to worship death or fear, refuses to allow either of them to control his life; instead, he takes action to maintain control over them. Thus, Morrison's Shadrack literally resembles his biblical namesake: he refuses to worship the golden image of death.

There seems to be one final similarity between the Biblical Shadrach and Morrison's character. Near the end of *Daniel*, iii, King Nebuchadnez'zar realizes that his banishment of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed'nego into the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship his image was in vain; he "saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men" (*Daniel*, iii, 27). Because Shadrach and the two others refused to worship the King's god and instead maintained a devout belief in their own God, they were immune to the fire that incinerated the male servants who were ordered to throw the three men into the furnace. As we will see later in this discussion, the similarities between Nebuchadnez'zar's fiery furnace and the New River Road tunnel collapse in *Sula* are uncanny. Both the furnace and the tunnel kill

those who reject their own heritage and assume instead the belief systems of their oppressors. Both Shadrach and Shadrack refuse to abandon their selfhood and both survive the death that comes to others who cross over and adopt the behavior of those who hate them. Shadrack's resemblance to the Shadrach in Daniel seems more literal than ironic. Additionally, as I will demonstrate, Shadrack's behavior is even more explicable in the context of African-American history. His annual "musical" challenge to the forces of racism and death shows his power as a blues man.

Plum Peace, another World War I veteran in *Sula*, is not as successful in readapting to civilian life. Plum, like Shadrack, left for Europe in 1917, returned to the States in 1919, and finally came home to Medallion in 1920. When he returns, Morrison notes that "there was something obviously wrong" (*Sula*, 45). Like Shadrack he also returns to Medallion with absolutely nothing, with "just the shadow of his old dip-down walk. His hair had neither been cut or combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks" (*Sula*, 45). Unlike Shadrack, he is unable to reconstruct the identity that he had lost during the war. While living in his mother Eva's house he "began to steal from them, take trips to Cincinnati and [would] sleep for days in his room with the record player going" (*Sula*, 45). Hannah Peace, his eldest sister, discovers that Plum is shooting up drugs when she finds the bent spoon in Plum's room, black from steady cooking.

Eva kills her own child to prevent even worse abuse. In this case, she does it by dousing Plum with kerosene while he is asleep and setting him on fire. (In Morrison's later novel, *Beloved*, Sethe's act of infanticide bears strong similarities to Eva's act in *Sula*. Sethe does in fact kill her baby rather than allow her child to be taken back into slavery.) Eva envisions Plum's drug addiction as a regression into a different kind of slavery: a kind of infantile helplessness. Eva clearly understands Plum's fatal addiction:

> I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just

> thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man (*Sula*, 72).

Shadrack, by comparison, does not succumb to the psychological traumas of the war or the racial injustice rampant in post-war America by regressing into a childlike or drug-induced state. Instead, he invents a unique and almost comic response to alleviate his fears. Shadrack creates a musical offering, or blues ritual: "On the third day of the new year, he walked through the Bottom down Carpenter's Road with a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other" (*Sula*, 14). In contrast to the formal, ominous communal drum beat that accompanies the protest march in *Jazz*, Shadrack rings a single "doomy, gloomy cowbell" (*Sula*, 158), and uses his voice to create the dirge-like melody for his parade.

Shadrack's solitary dirge or wail can be compared and traced to the hollers that formed the musical roots of the blues. As I have mentioned in the introduction, the holler was created during slavery by the teamsters who had to identify their whereabouts while they were traveling around their master's property. Shadrack's holler or dirge accomplishes a similar purpose by notifying the townspeople of his location so that they can meet him in the road and accompany him in the parade. Like Douglass's description of the teamster's hollers, Shadrack's holler also simultaneously contains and expresses the seemingly contradictory elements of rapture and melancholy. As Ivy suggests, Shadrack's dirge was a "thick music that rocked her neighbor's breasts" (*Sula*, 159).

Shadrack's clarion call for the people of the Bottom to kill themselves or each other may pose ethical problems for some readers. The modes of protest and resistance that Shadrack and the other blues people in Morrison's novels employ to empower themselves against racial oppression may strike such readers informed by Western traditions as peculiar or morally reprehensible. For example, many of Morrison's characters, who are not blues people, engage in violent, anti-establish-

ment behavior in an attempt to gain some sense of empowerment in their lives. But our evaluation of these characters' actions must take into account the historical and social conditions that shape their consciences and actions. We may condemn Sethe for murdering her baby and perceive Eva's torching of Plum as ethically repugnant if we do not take into acount the horrors of slave existence and drug addiction, which Morrison sees as worse than death. Most certainly, we see Cholly's rape of Pecola as bestial behavior, even when we understand the humiliation which he has suffered as an adolescent.

Another concept that may enlarge our understanding of these texts is "the ethics of compromise." Robert Crossley, in his introduction to the 1988 edition of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, discusses the ethic of compromise that Dana Franklin, the protagonist of *Kindred*, practices in order to survive under slavery and compares her actions to those of Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In Crossley's view, Jacobs compromised the sexual standards imposed on nineteenth-century women in order to maintain a central core of integrity and freedom of will and to safeguard her children and herself. Crossley states that Jacobs reluctantly practiced a situational ethics dictated by the extreme circumstances that constrained the choices of African-American women under slavery. Crossley goes on to observe that

> the crucial sentence around which our understanding of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* must be fashioned is her retrospective revision of the ethical norms that govern a woman's choices and behaviors under systematic oppression: 'Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others' (Butler, xxii).

This statement by Harriet Jacobs, in which she believes that her actions under slavery need to be evaluated differently from those of individuals not restricted by slavery, helps us to understand more fully the actions of a number of Morrison's characters—not only those directly oppressed by slavery as Sethe is in *Beloved*, but

also those characters who are attempting to cope with the aftermath of slavery and racism in America.

In such an environment, Morrison suggests, music provides a powerful alternative or antidote to the violence, bestial behavior, and melancholy to which African Americans have been subjected in this country. The blues, in particular, formulate and express a core of integrity and freedom of will for Morrison's characters, which they can employ as an alternative to their oppressor's bestial behavior, putting an end to the cycle of hatred. The blues are also confrontational and thus not only provide a healing force, but also a language of protest and resistance. Thus in order to better understand Morrison's characters who push Western boundaries to their limits, we must examine the cultural functions of West-African and African-American music in her novels.

In addition to Shadrack's dirge, which he re-invents to accomplish the same functions as the holler in the blues, a number of other musical elements in his Suicide Day parade seem to echo West-African cultural archetypes, adapted to fill certain critical needs for the community in the Bottom. One important West-African musical element that we find in Shadrack's parade is antiphony or the call-and-response or question-and-response form. John Storm Roberts explains that

> by far the most common form of group singing in most parts of Africa is the call-and-response style, in which a lead singer sings a line, or a phrase, and a group answers it. This is quite different from the common European form of a verse of several lines followed (or not) by a chorus. For one thing, the European verse is complete in itself, while the African call by itself is only half of the equation; it needs the response before it is complete. Moreover, though the lead singer is very important and has a good deal of freedom to improvise, in many areas it is the chorus's response that is considered the essential part of the tune (Roberts, 9).

Morrison is strongly aware of these West-African antiphonal or choral traditions and has deliberately incorporated them in all of her novels. As she describes in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *The Bluest Eye* the "I" narrator serves as

the choral note, in *Sula* the town functions as a choral character, in *Song of Solomon* the neighborhood and the community respond as a chorus in the two parts of town, and in *Tar Baby* all nature answers chorally to the action. Morrison explains that, "Those are the ways in which I try to incorporate, into that traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is, in my view, Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art" ("Rootedness," 431-342).

During the early years of Shadrack's parade, the antiphonal nature of the blues ritual is seen more readily in people's reactions to Shadrack's performance rather than in their actual participation or choral response to Shadrack's dirge:

> As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack's solitary parade. In fact they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives (*Sula*, 15).

Morrison then describes a number of examples in which the citizens of Medallion repeat or answer Shadrack's call during the parade, embedding the ritual into their "traditional rites of birth, harvest, and matrimony" (Baker, *Workings*, 139). One example is a woman, who in describing her pregnancy, dates the beginning of her labor as happening on Suicide Day. Another example involves a young couple who decide their wedding cannot occur on Suicide Day because they "ain't 'bout to be listening to no cowbells whilst the weddin's going on" (*Sula*, 16). And finally a grandmother in *Sula* reports that her hens always started laying double yolks right after Suicide Day.

The antiphonal nature of the parade is far more pronounced years later in the "1941" chapter. A particularly harsh winter had descended on Medallion that year and "the normal meanness that the winter brought was compounded by the small-spiritedness that hunger and scarlet fever produced" (*Sula*, 154). When Shadrack begins his twenty-second annual and usually solitary parade that January third, the sun shines brightly and he is greeted for the first time by nearly everyone in the

town. Morrison writes:

> Everybody, Dessie, Tar Baby, Patsy, Mr. Buckland Reed, Teapot's Mamma, Valentine, the deweys, Mrs. Jackson, Irene, the proprietor of the Palace of Cosmetology, Reba, the Herrod brothers and flocks of teen-agers got into the mood and, laughing, dancing, calling to one another, formed a pied piper's band behind Shadrack. As the initial group of about twenty people passed more houses, they called to the people standing in doors and leaning out of windows to join them; to help them open further this slit in the veil, this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before. Called to them to come out and play in the sunshine—as though the sunshine would last, as though there really was hope (*Sula*, 159-160).

This excerpt describes not only the antiphonal nature of the parade, which is demonstrated in the people laughing, dancing, and calling to each other behind and in response to Shadrack's musical lead, but it also explains the way in which the parade functioned much as a blues song, offering a vehicle of redemption to the oppressed townspeople of Medallion. Similar to the elements of a blues ritual which I find in *The Bluest Eye*, Shadrack's parade also involves both performer and audience in a communal, ritualized reenactment of extreme emotional states in which the purpose is to return from these states—to survive trouble, not succumb to it. The ritualized elements of this parade are obvious: Shadrack leads it every January third for twenty-two years, and he always carries a cowbell and a hangman's rope. The salvific qualities of the parade are evident in the audience's response, allowing the revelers to forget their anxieties and to cast off the weight of the pain that caused them great sorrow in the past. However, in 1941 the audience in *Sula* did not complete the blues ritual; they did not return from or survive their extreme emotional state.

Ernest Borneman's typology of West-African song seems to fit the patterns of cultural behavior in *Sula*. Borneman identifies one type as "songs used by chiefs to keep the community under control and preserve its coherence: songs used to arouse common emotions and a sense of joint participation" (Borneman, 4), which seems to

fit Shadrack's music especially well, particularly later in the novel when the community members absorb National Suicide Day into their collective consciousness. National Suicide Day is created precisely to keep the community of Bottom under control by "making a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (*Sula*, 14). And as we see in the "1941" chapter, the community does experience a sense of joint participation during the parade that year. They feel "a respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity... as though there really was hope" (*Sula*, 160). Borneman's second West-African song category that seems to fit the activities in *Sula* is the type of song "used by warriors to arouse courage in battle and instill fear in the enemy: battle songs, ballads commemorating past victories, legends of dead heroes" (Borneman, 4). Morrison's images of the difficulties African-American veterans encountered during and after World War I clearly demonstrate that although the African-American soldiers' physical involvement with the war were over when they returned to the United States, in many ways their real battle was just beginning. Newly-cognizant of the racial inequalities they were forced to endure in the United States, a battle song, it seems to me, is an apt response to the experiences which they would still have to suffer.

The town's gradual acceptance of Shadrack's yearly parade suggests another remnant of West-African musical culture that lingers in Morrison's novel. Throughout *Sula*, we are reminded that West-African music rarely contains a moralizing element. Similarly, Mary Ellison describes the absence of condemnatory elements in the blues. Instead, they often center on mistakes that could have been avoided or catastrophes that might have been averted. She observes that a distinctive and very West-African feature of the blues is that they do not become an opportunity for moralizing, as might be the case in a Western ballad. "In the blues," according to Ellison, "the event is lamented, the misdoer is not blamed but is seen as the victim of all too common circumstances" (*Extensions*, 13). John Storm Roberts presents a similar example of the lack of West-African moralizing in songs when he describes

the African-American ballad about the death of the wicked character Railroad Bill. This song, he explains, records the historical though trivial fact that Railroad Bill died with a cracker and cheese in his hand. Roberts explains that "this fixing of a scene with an everyday detail is part of a mundaneness common in African and Afro-American music of many types. White ballads on the death of an evil doer almost invariably draw a moral" (Roberts, 156).

In addition to the Medallion residents' acceptance of Shadrack's strange yearly blues ritual, Morrison presents another example in *Sula* of the town's refusal to engage in Western moral posturing when presented with an odd situation. In the "1937" chapter, when Sula returns to Medallion after an absence of ten years, her arrival is accompanied by a "plague of robins." The townspeople called the arrival of the shuddering, dying birds "evil days," and Morrison records its impact on the citizens:

> In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people (*Sula*, 89-90).

This response of the community, to allow nature to run its course, seems very similar to the blues response to misfortune set forth by Ortiz Walton, who describes the blues as encompassing all the earth's "paradoxes, where both its joys and pains are synthesized and resolved into an emotional-spiritual unity that helps make possible life's continuance" (Walton, 29). Morrison echoes this blues philosophy in *Sula* 's plague of robins: "The purpose of evil is to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance" (*Sula*, 90).

Clearly the echoes of West-African culture, along with the ethics of compromise which were necessary in many cases for survival, surface frequently in African-

American music and fiction and must be distinguished from Western morality. Toni Morrison addresses these important ethical differences when she discusses her writing of *Sula*: "when I was writing about good and evil, I really wasn't writing about them in Western terms. It was interesting to me that black people... thought evil had a natural place in the universe; they did not want to eradicate it" (Tate, 129).

This African-American view of evil appears frequently in Morrison's novels and essays. She has commented a number of times on her admiration for the "outlaw" qualities of several of her characters. She wishes she had not added the prologue to *Sula* so that the "creative outlaw" qualities of Shadrack would have been more prominent. She has referred to these outlaw characters as the salt tasters, claiming that they express either an effort of the will or a freedom of the will and that they are the misunderstood people of the world:

> There's a wildness that they have, a nice wildness.... This special lack of restraint, which is a part of human life and is best typified in certain black males, is of particular interest to me. It's in black men despite the reasons society says they're not supposed to have it. Everybody knows who 'that man' is, and they may give him bad names and call him a 'street nigger' but when you take away the vocabulary of denigration, what you have is somebody who is fearless and who is comfortable with that fearlessness.... It's a kind of self-flagellant resistance to certain kinds of control (Tate, 127).

These "outlaw" qualities, also found and celebrated in the blues, have been described by Paul Garon. He says that the blues and jazz "share a poetically subversive core, an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny" (Garon, 8). African-American music, according to Garon, like much of Morrison's fiction, remains unquestionably oppositional.

However, the blues do not always redeem the time. The ending of Shadrack's 1941 Suicide Day parade powerfully suggests the limits within which the blues can function as a catalyst for survival. As the crowd behind Shadrack in the parade grows larger and larger, they strut, skip, and march down Carpenter's Road, through Main Street in the white part of town, on along the New River Road and

finally gather at the mouth of the tunnel excavation and construction, which runs under the river connecting Medallion to Porter's Landing, the town on the other side. The tunnel becomes a symbol to the residents of the Bottom of opportunities denied them by the white business owners for serious and much needed work since it was being built entirely by white labor—hillbillies and immigrants taking even the lowest paid jobs. The large crowd behind Shadrack quickly turns into a mob, beginning to destroy the tunnel, from which they had been excluded since 1927. In the fevered pitch of their melee, they enter too deeply into the tunnel. When the unfinished tunnel starts to collapse "the clamber to get out was so fierce that others who were trying to help were pulled to their deaths" (*Sula*, 162). Tar Baby, Dessie, Ivy, Mrs. Jackson, the Herrod boys, some of Ajax's younger brothers, and the deweys all die in the collapse. During the disaster, Morrison tells us, "Shadrack stood there. Having forgotten his song and his rope, he just stood there high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell" (*Sula*, 162).

We might be led to believe that Shadrack finally fulfilled his prophecy, that the mass suicide that occurred on the twenty-second Suicide Day in effect brought Shadrack's mission and the novel full circle. I suggest, however, that this would be a misreading of the blues element in Shadrack's parade. The townspeople who died in the tunnel were unable to understand that the blues—in this case the parade—are themselves a sufficient protest against and response to white oppression. Morrison seems to be cautioning readers that when any person assumes the qualities and characteristics of his or her oppressor, redemption will never be gained. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove's internalization of white society's pervasive racial hatred cause them to believe and act as if they are indeed ugly, which leads to their downfall. Like Shadrach in the fiery furnace, they will survive destruction only if they are true to their own essential selves. In *Sula*, we again are presented with the horrific results when bestial treatment of human beings produces, even for only one afternoon, a race of beasts. Morrison seems to believe that

only by pursuing their own cultural identity, as Shadrack continues to do at the end of the novel "high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell" (*Sula*, 162), will the African American survive in the face of the racial injustices embedded in American society.

Ortiz Walton suggests that "the blues represent the collective yearnings and feelings [of the community]... [and that] the personal life of the [blues] artist becomes the prototype of the collective" (Walton, 28). We have seen in Morrison's presentation of Shadrack's National Suicide Day parade that he had consciously tried to understand his personal horrors and, albeit gruesomely, to express his story to his community members. Shadrack's yearly, dogged determination to carry out his parade despite the taunts and ridicule he received during the first twenty-one years, demonstrates his commitment to provide an alternative vision that links the members of his community to their West-African heritage. Like Morrison, Ralph Ellison has also pointed out the limits within which the blues can offer salvation. He suggests that the blues "fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self" (*Shadow*, 94). The people who died were unable to understand the purpose of Shadrack's parade. Shadrack's autobiographical and musical chronicle was meant to absorb some of their fears; his performance was supposed to take the place of their anxieties. The mass suicide that closes the main portion of *Sula* suggests that blues people and creative outlaws have the determination and savvy to survive in part by tapping into and reinventing their West-African cultural legacy. However, those individuals who do not listen to their blues message, but instead follow their own anger, will very possibly perish.

Jazz: Prelude to Salvation and Imminent Demise

Toni Morrison's most recent novel *Jazz* (1992) has perplexed a number of her critics who anticipated from its title a jazzy rendition of African-American life during the Jazz Age in the 1920s. Instead, as readers have discovered, the narrator of *Jazz*, an intelligent and introspective unnamed resident of Harlem, tells in formal, even intellectual, language a far more circuitous and even contradictory story. The central figures in the narrative are Joe and Violet Trace who moved to Harlem in 1906 from Vesper County, Virginia. The pivotal events of the novel take place twenty years later, when Joe shoots and kills his eighteen-year-old lover, Dorcas Manfred, and then Violet attempts to slash the dead girl's face during her funeral. The rest of the novel describes Joe and Violet's bewilderment and grief-stricken struggle to recover "their whispering, old-time love" (*Jazz*, 228), set against the changing backdrop of Harlem.

As the title suggests, jazz and other forms of African-American music perform certain strong functions in this novel. In this section I will examine two specific types of music and their functions in *Jazz*, their West-African cultural archetypes, and the subsequent historical events which transformed them in African-American culture. In this novel, I suggest that it is Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, who is a blues woman, a person who is able to envision and employ music like a lifeline to her West-African heritage, enabling her to come to terms with her fears of racism. I will also suggest that in her role as a blues woman Alice attempts to pass this knowledge on to her niece Dorcas but this transmission fails. Instead, through an unlikely friendship with Violet, Alice succeeds in passing on the essence of the blues ritual. Consequently, Violet also becomes a blues woman, who passes on to Felice, Dorcas's

best friend, the empowering essence of the blues. Throughout the story of these three women's lives, the euphemistic meaning behind the novel's title is a seductive force, urging them to surrender to the sexual abandonment that jazz and the blues so clearly manifest.

First, however, I will examine some of the recent critical writing on the function of music in *Jazz*. My purpose here is twofold: to review the literature, which I believe constitutes a strong example of the trend in literary criticism to perpetuate unfortunate misunderstandings about the role and purpose of African-American music in African-American life and literature. More importantly, I hope to develop the groundwork from which I can articulate a more careful examination of the role of music in the development of Alice and Violet as well as Dorcas's untimely death.

Thus far there has not been a full-length study of *Jazz*; critical response has been limited to reviews. A number of reviewers who have criticized Morrison's use of jazz in this novel have relied on their own subjective definitions of this African-American musical form to substantiate their arguments. Indeed many of the critical reviews of *Jazz* are reminiscent of the subjective analyses of music in Morrison's work presented by Wegs, Berrett, Rodrigues, and Fryar. Like those studies, these newer reviews seem to present partial or even distorted discussions of the role of music in *Jazz*.

Early reviews of *Jazz* even suggest that jazz and other forms of African-American music ought to have particular "sounds" in the novel. For example, Craig Seligman in *The Three Penny Review* stresses that for all of the carefully researched detail in *Jazz*, "it doesn't communicate the snap, or the heat, of the era—it doesn't feel jazzy. There's nothing improvisational in this cerebral, perfect prose" (Seligman, 7). Bruce Bawer, in a review of *Jazz* in *The New Criterion*, argues that Morrison's use of music shows a negative side of African-American culture: "her fiction can be as monotonous as the most pointlessly protracted of modern jazz improvisation, as melodramatic as the most maudlin blues ballad, as mindless as the most hackneyed

spiritual" (Bawer, 10). In contrast, Ann Hulbert in *The New Republic* boldly—and in complete contradiction to Craig Seligman's assumptions—asserts that "the improvisatory course of a jam session is the evident model for the gnomic narrator who recounts Joe Trace's affair with teen-aged Dorcas" (Hulbert, 46). Earlier in Hulbert's review, however, she does seem to hone in more closely on the role of music in *Jazz* when she says that "the blues are Morrison's guide to the rawer, less symmetrical chronicle that she aims to offer" (Hulbert, 46). Hulbert's identification of the "asymmetrical" qualities of the blues found in *Jazz* seem a more accurate description of the function of music in this novel; however, she does not explore these qualities in depth.

Michael Wood's analysis of the function of music in *Jazz* in *The New York Review of Books* seems to come the closest to describing music's actual function in Morrison's fiction. Wood claims that *Jazz*

> is not a novel about jazz, or based on jazz... but what it borrows from jazz is a sense of flight and variation, not a method of composition. The novel is dedicated to the taste and the air of jazz, to what jazz says to people who care for it" (Wood, 10-11).

I believe that Wood is correct in claiming that *Jazz* is not a novel *about* jazz or based on jazz forms. His insight that the jazz method of composition is not necessarily the narrative model upon which Morrison based this work also is useful. However, while he observes that the novel is dedicated to what jazz says to people who care about jazz, he never defines who these people are or what "jazz says." He does suggest the identity of these people who care about jazz in the conclusion of his review when he quotes one of Morrison's examples. Wood describes a scene late in the novel when young African Americans on rooftops in Harlem play a tune "pure and steady and kind of kind" (*Jazz*, 196). Morrison writes that "you would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played" (*Jazz*, 196). Wood suggests that this ability to offer absolution from guilt is "one of jazz's real gifts to us" (Wood, 11). This analysis, I believe, is possibly too Eurocentric, suggesting that jazz

communicates the same qualities to white listeners as well as African-American participants; he also implies that Morrison's purpose is to assuage the pain and guilt of all readers. While Wood's intention in this analysis is well-meaning, he, like a number of other critics, seems to misread Morrison's project by attempting to universalize or homogenize the very specific African American phenomena that Morrison portrays in her fiction. In *Jazz* and indeed in Morrison's other novels, she gives voice to the African-American experience for *all* readers to understand. Nonetheless, Wood's ideas offer a good starting point for this discussion of the function of music in *Jazz*. In fact, both Hulbert and Wood seem to be on the brink of uncovering some of the qualities that music brings to *Jazz*.

Jazz evocatively portrays the thriving African-American art forms that emanated from Harlem during the Jazz Age. Because of this, the novel also poses distinct interpretive problems for critics not versed in African-American culture or its West-African sources. By the 1920s the massive migrations of African Americans from the South to the North had ended, and as Ortiz Walton points out "subsequent to this population movement there was a flowering of black culture which became known as the Harlem Renaissance" (Walton, 78). During the Twenties and the Thirties, Harlem was a mecca for African-American music, poetry, history, and education. Walton further explains that the fundamental philosophical tenet behind this flourishing of African-American culture was the idea that "If both whites and blacks could be educated to the black man's worth, discrimination could be ended once and for all. It was this idea that gave the Harlem Renaissance its motive force" (Walton, 78).

Toni Morrison has discussed the importance of African-American culture in the Jazz Age and the interpretive problems inherent in understanding this era in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." She claims that "a modernity which overturns pre-war definitions, ushers in the Jazz Age (an age *defined* by Afro-American art and culture), and requires new kinds of intelligences to define oneself" ("Un-

speakable," 26). She is concerned that traditional literary critics may be ill-equipped to discuss literary works based upon and defined by African-American art and culture since most draw on a Eurocentric or Western world view, which has traditionally debased non-European art forms, calling them barbaric or unsophisticated. The challenge, as Morrison sees it, is that critics must begin to verse themselves in African-American culture in order to reverse this trend and more adequately discuss the work of African-American writers.

In Morrison's novel *Sula*, Shadrack is a character who epitomizes the Jazz Age because he very consciously overturns the pre-war definitions and characteristics that constrain him and invents a new definition of himself based on African-American culture. Shadrack's National Suicide Day represents a new determination on his part to resist the racial oppression he encounters in the United States after fighting in World War I. Shadrack's strategy, however, is not invented solely out of the African-American art and culture of the 1920s. It goes back still further, suggesting remnants and echoes of West-African music and culture, transformed by slavery and its aftermath into a solution to Shadrack's unique situation.

Joe Trace in *Jazz* also seems to embody Morrison's definition of the Jazz Age, creating a new definition of himself not once but seven different times. When the narrator describes the blues man, the "so-lonesome-I-could die man," she concludes that "Joe probably thinks that the song is about him. He'd like believing it. I know him so well" (*Jazz*, 119). Unlike Shadrack, however, Joe is not a blues man and his frequent metamorphoses do not yield him a new identity or strategy to fully overcome the painful circumstances of his life. As he explains, Dorcas Manfred was the one element that he could not transmute:

> I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I've been a new Negro all my life. But all I lived through, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcas (*Jazz*, 129).

Despite Joe's many reincarnations, he never succeeds in fully understanding who he

is and at the end of the novel he resigns himself to the fact that his quest to become "a new Negro" has failed.

In *Jazz* Morrison presents a portrait of abounding optimism among the African Americans who lived in Harlem during the Jazz Age. Part of this optimism was due to the fact that World War I was over and nearly everyone believed that there would never be another war. Many of the residents, who had recently moved north to New York City, believed that they had left the relics of slavery behind in the South and had entered a society which would offer them economic parity and a job that would permit them to become active participants in the capitalistic system. The narrator explains that in the North

> the money to be earned for doing light work—standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning strangers' shoes—got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one whole harvest. White people literally threw money at you—just for being neighborly: opening a taxi door, picking up a package (*Jazz*, 106).

In the northern cities African Americans had even made some small inroads into the professions. We learn in *Jazz* that in New York City an African-American surgeon regularly visited Harlem Hospital and the first class of thirty-five African-American nurses graduated from Bellevue Hospital. In a euphoric passage Morrison captures the hopefulness of the residents of Harlem:

> At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last (*Jazz*, 7).

Morrison seems to be describing the Jazz Age as a time when African Americans' new conception of their roles and opportunities as American citizens—a vision which LeRoi Jones identified as the "modern American Negro"—was contingent on their blotting out from their memory the "economics of slavery," and indeed required forgetting their oppressive history. But, the "sad stuff" and "bad stuff" that

Morrison's narrator flippantly tells us to forget was necessary for the creation of the African-American art and culture that defined the Jazz Age. Furthermore, in Morrison's novels we know that history is never over. This fact is demonstrated in *Jazz* when the narrator recounts an event that occurred nine years earlier, which obviously continues to resonate in the present.

In the third chapter of *Jazz* we are introduced to Alice Manfred on a sticky, bright afternoon in July 1917. In this scene we learn that Alice and her newly orphaned niece Dorcas, who had been left in Alice's protection after her parents had been murdered, had been standing for three hours on Fifth Avenue watching a parade of African-American men and women moving slowly to the rhythm of drums. The silent men and women were marching down Fifth Avenue to demonstrate their anger over the two hundred African Americans—including Dorcas's mother and father—who had been killed in the East St. Louis riots.

This parade, I believe, performs a crucial function in *Jazz*, representing the amalgamation of African-American and West-African culture, which enabled African Americans to respond to the discrimination and racial hatred they were forced to bear. We can see some of the social and political causes of African-American resistance to racial injustice during and after World War I in Morrison's novel *Sula*. Other cultural and musical factors underscore the significance of this parade in *Jazz*.

Drums provide not only a time-keeping rhythm for the marchers on Fifth Avenue, but also supply the "music" for this parade. While Alice is standing on the curb marveling at the cold African-American faces, she is "listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not" (*Jazz*, 53). In addition we learn that the very purpose of the parade, to express anger over the pointless deaths in East St. Louis, is communicated by the drums, that "what was meant came from the drums" (*Jazz*, 53). Although Morrison does not describe the type of drums or the rhythm they produced, I believe that they could be snare drums given that there were Boy Scouts passing out leaflets in the parade and Boy Scouts often per-

form with or are affiliated with drum and bugle corps. Regardless of their model, these drums obviously are used as if they were West-African percussive instruments. Although the type of drums used in *Jazz* are updated and changed from their West-African archetypal ancestors, they still perform many of the same social and cultural communicative functions as drums did in seventeenth-century West Africa. It is important to note, however, that there are no bugles or any form of melody in the Harlem parade to dominate or compete with the rhythms the drums are creating.

As I discussed earlier two types of West-African archetypal songs as identified by Borneman appear in a modified form in Shadrack's parade in *Sula*. These included those songs used to arouse common community emotions and to control coherence and those songs used to arouse courage in battle. The historical and political circumstances of the parade in *Jazz* are nearly identical to those affecting the parade in *Sula*; consequently, the West-African archetypes in both parades suggest a powerful communal action. Since the drums occupy such a central role in the parade in *Jazz*, however, I see more significant West-African cultural influences at work, transformed to accomplish certain functions in the 1920s African-American setting.

Most writers agree that whereas in Western music rhythm typically plays a subservient role to the melody, acting as an accompaniment, in West-African music these roles are reversed with rhythm performing a more central role than the melody. John Storm Roberts suggests that the importance of rhythm in West-African music cannot be overemphasized. These rhythms and percussive effects, he points out, are highly sophisticated and far more complex than the "savage drumming" stereotype would imply. Roberts explains that

> Meaningful sounds are the basis of African music, as they are of any other music, but there seems to be value not only in the sounds themselves but also, to use Khetia's words, 'in their arrangement in orderly sequences or patterns of rhythm.' In traditional music, at least in the 'drumming tribes' of West Africa, such as the Yoruba and the Ewe, rhythm is basic to enjoyment. Pieces with almost no 'tune' in a Western sense are enjoyed if there is sufficient rhythmic interest (Roberts, 11).

Borneman also refutes the savage drumming myth that characterizes Western views of West-African music. He describes the intricate relationship between language and music that exists in West-African cultures and the way in which drums can be manipulated to sound like speech:

> We have known for some decades that the West-African drum language was not a primitive sort of Morse code but a phonetic reproduction of the sound of words; only languages dependent on pitch, vibrato and timing lend themselves to such treatment. The time element was the easiest to reproduce on a drumhead; changes of pitch were effected by changes of pressure on the drum skin; changes of vibrato were effected by vibrating the knees while holding the drum tightly clasped to the drummers' laps; or vibrating the arm while holding it in the armpit. Thus language and music were not strictly divided, and the average standard of musical talent was correspondingly high (Borneman, 6).

Roberts's and Borneman's identification of the importance of drumming rhythms in West-African cultures, and of the similarities between West-African language and music, provide an interpretive framework for the parade scene in *Jazz*. Morrison describes the way in which these archetypal West-African functions in music resurface centuries later. The narrator, in describing Alice's reaction to the parade, points out that

> The drums and the freezing faces hurt her, but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time... Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with their own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T (*Jazz*, 54).

This is a stunning example of the translation of West-African musical functions to Harlem with drums, providing a language of protest and resistance: "the drums said for them" what they did not trust themselves to say. The intricate relationship between seventeenth-century West-African language and music has not been lost to African-Americans in the twentieth-century Jazz Age.

There indeed were many reasons why Alice Manfred was afraid. As an African-American women her sexuality and identity were seen by the white men and women with whom she reluctantly came into contact as not belonging to her but to them. Morrison describes the white men who leaned out of cars with folded dollar bills in their palms, the salesmen who touched her and only her, the fact that she had no surname when she was addressed by a white person, and the instructions she anxiously passed on to Dorcas about deafness and blindness, "how to do anything, move anywhere to avoid a whiteboy over the age of eleven" (*Jazz*, 55). Far more brutal, however, were Alice's memories of the death of her brother-in-law and her sister who had been living in East St. Louis since before the war. During the riots, Alice's brother-in-law, who wasn't even involved in the riot, was pulled off a street-car and stomped to death, and her sister was burned to death when her house was torched.

An epiphanic moment occurs during the parade while Alice is struggling to create some sort of a connection between her personal fears, the gruesome, racially motivated deaths of her brother-in-law and sister, and the tide of cold, black faces marching down Fifth Avenue. During this episode, the redemptive West-African cultural functions inherent in the parade coalesce in Alice's mind and she is all at once able to create an alternative vision to the horrors that racism has wrought in her life:

> suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above. Alice carried that gathering rope with her always after that day on Fifth Avenue, and found it reliably secure and tight—most of the time (*Jazz*, 58).

The drums have provided a language of healing.

Thus we see that this parade serves a similar purpose to Shadrack's National Suicide Day parade in *Sula*. Both parades function in some ways as blues rituals, a

paradoxical blend of resistance and pain, joy and melancholy. While the blues elements in Shadrack's parade surface in the participants' "respite from anxiety... from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before" (*Sula*, 160), the blues elements in *Jazz*'s parade are evident when the drums and the freezing faces hurt Alice, "but hurt was better than fear" (*Jazz*, 54). This observation that hurt was better than fear is important because it connects the parade more closely with the concepts of rapture and melancholy found in the blues. Clearly the pain that Alice and the other participants and observers of the parade experience is cathartic. As a part of their West-African cultural heritage, the drums perform two functions: first, they give voice to the anger of African Americans who, before the parade, had been forced to suffer discrimination in silence; and second, they create for all those affiliated with the parade a unique and salvific sense of community. By examining and acknowledging her pain through the accompaniment of the drums, Alice experiences an act of repossession and she is able to transcend her fears. Her sense of well being, reflected in the surface of the African-American music of the Jazz Age as well as on the cultural remnants of her West-African past, is not momentary. Instead she has created a new sense of intelligence, which she can summon nearly every time she is in need of comfort. The narrator observes Alice performing this act some time later. She says that "I have seen her... reach with one hand for the safe gathering rope thrown to her eight years ago on Fifth Avenue, and ball the other one into a fist in her coat pocket" (*Jazz*, 59).

Another type of music surfaces in Alice's ruminations during the parade, which she first compares to the rhythm of the drums but then concedes is an entirely different form of music. This new kind of music, which Alice describes as "the lowdown stuff that signaled Imminent Demise" (*Jazz*, 56), contains many of the outlaw qualities—the wildness, special lack of constraint, and fearlessness—for which Morrison has expressed her admiration. (I discuss these outlaw qualities, particularly the way in which they define Shadrack, in the section on *Sula*.) Alice's

reaction to the outlaw qualities in this music is similar to the response that Morrison mentions in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* when she describes Marie Cardinal's recollection of her anxiety attack during a Louis Armstrong concert, which caused Cardinal to run into the street like someone possessed. Morrison's delight in Cardinal's description leads her to ask: "What on earth was Louie playing that night? [and] What was there in his music that drove this sensitive young girl hyperventilating into the street?" (*Playing*, vii).

In *Jazz*, Morrison provides an answer to the question she poses in *Playing in the Dark* when she describes Alice's reaction to the "lowdown stuff":

> Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin for a tie—either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music (*Jazz*, 59).

The "complicated" anger that Alice identifies in this music is more than likely the same element in Louis Armstrong's concert that caused Marie Cardinal to experience so much anxiety. While Cardinal was seized with panic by the confrontational nature of the music, Alice was filled with hatred toward the music's rapaciousness. The oppositional, angry nature of the blues and jazz thus draws an antithetical response from individuals held in slavery and long denied any other sort of expression or art form and those who live in oppressive white societies. Clearly, as Paul Garon has suggested, "all authentic blues and jazz share a poetically subversive core, an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny... this revolt cannot be 'assimilated' into the abject mainstream of American bourgeois/Christian culture" (Garon, 7).

The roaring seduction and fearless appetite that Alice despises in this type of music underscores another confrontational quality of jazz, which is the frank sexual content found in the lyrics, rhythms, and performances of the blues and jazz. Fre-

quently throughout the text, Morrison portrays the euphemistic meaning behind this novel's title, describing how jazz "begged and challenged each and every day. 'Come,' it said. 'Come and do wrong.' " (*Jazz*, 67).

To better understand the sexual undercurrents in the blues and jazz, and consequently the fear it incites in many listeners, it is important to see its relationship to the psychological legacies of slavery. Slave owners justified their practices by perpetuating the belief that the West Africans they held in bondage, and the succeeding generations of African Americans, were not human beings but some animal sub-species. Connected to this belief that African Americans were not human beings was the myth that slave owners created about the sexual prowess of African-American males and the extraordinary sexual powers of African-American women, who were forced, because of their status as chattel, to engage in sexual relations with their owners. These myths surrounding African-American sexuality persisted into the 1920s and indeed still linger in the collective American conscience today. These sexual myths remaining from slavery are reflected in the undercurrent of fear created in some listeners by African-American music.

It is equally important to examine the way in which African Americans have responded to these myths and historical artifacts in their creation of that music. Some of the frank sexual nature and seductive innuendo found in the blues and jazz can be traced back to West-African song that Borneman describes. Borneman suggests that some songs were used by young men (and young women, according to Davis) to influence the opposite sex: songs of courtship, songs of challenge, and songs of scorn. The elements of scorn and derision in West-African courtship rituals may help to explain in part the presence of confrontational sexuality found in jazz.

Equally-important to the development of the sexual content in African-American music is the fact that slavery denied former West Africans and their descendants the right to engage in their traditional courtship practices and to build families and communities. Angela Davis discusses the important role that music

played after slavery was abolished and African Americans were once again able to recreate the love relationships and families that had been denied them under slavery. Davis points out that

> the blues incorporated a new consciousness about private love relationships, which had been denied to Black people, except in rudimentary ways, as long as they were slaves. In many ways, in fact, interpersonal relationships functioned as metaphors for the freedom they sought: trouble in a relationship was trouble in the overall social universe. The happiness they sought in their relationships indicated by the expression of the need for 'a good woman' or for 'a man who won't treat me mean' symbolized their search for a life which would be free of the countless brutal realities encountered in postslavery America. If there was a hidden meaning behind the religious language of the spirituals, there was also a hidden meaning behind the sexual language of the blues" (Davis, 11-12).

Martha Bayles also suggests that particularly in the blues the topic of intimate, erotic relationships is frequently addressed. Bayles notes, for example, that many themes of the blues documented in Paul Oliver's study of traditional blues lyrics, *Blues Fell This Morning*, are erotic: "flirtation, romance, courtship, and marriage; fidelity and infidelity; sex in all its permutations, including sexual boasting and insult..." (Bayles, 14). While these themes are often treated with frankness in the blues and jazz, they are just as often, as Davis points out, cloaked in double-entendre and metaphor, which adds to the enjoyment of those listening to the music who are versed in such secret meanings. Ortiz Walton maintains that language characterized by double entendre has held persistently throughout African-American history, finding its way from slave music and language to blues lyrics and vernacular speech modes of contemporary African-American culture. Walton explains that "when double entendre and secret meaning are taken into account, new light is cast upon effective interpretations of the Blues, as well as upon their sociological influence" (Walton, 32).

In her fiction, Morrison incorporates both modes of African-American dis-

course on sexual relations which are expressed in the blues and jazz. In some instances she portrays erotic relationships with language that is dense with double entendre and metaphor; while in other instances she removes the metaphorical layer surrounding African-American discourse on love and sexuality to expose a precarious balance between sexuality and violence. An example of the former, metaphorical sexual language occurs in *Jazz* when Alice is aware and frightened of the sexual innuendoes lurking in the juke joint, barrel hooch, and tonk house music and particularly of the effects they might have on her niece Dorcas:

> ... the music was getting worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make himself known. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so low down you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirtsleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the lowdown stuff (*Jazz*, 56).

Morrison seamlessly blends many of the double entendres found in blues and jazz lyrics directly into the narrative of *Jazz*. For example, when Alice is trying to fall asleep, a line she doesn't remember enters loud and unsolicited in her head: "When I was young and in my prime I could get my barbecue any old time" (*Jazz*, 60). As this episode continues, Morrison plays even more boldly with bawdy jazz lyrics. In this scene, Alice's efforts as a blues woman to protect her niece from this low-down music, to keep the young girl's heart ignorant of her hips and her head in charge of both, have failed. Dorcas has discovered at a tender age the alluring powers that this music possesses:

> Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else (*Jazz*, 60).

Clearly Dorcas delights in the erotic messages the music conveys. It initiates her

sexual awakening and in a subversive way lures her to her disastrous end, despite Alice's attempts at censorship:

> Resisting her aunt's protection and restraining hands, Dorcas thought of that life-below-the-sash as all the life there was. The drums she heard at the parade were only the first part, the first word, of a command (*Jazz*, 60).

Davis's description of the way in which blues lyrics expressed the vitally important choices that ex-slaves were able to make in determining whom they would love, provides a good background for our interpretation of Joe and Violet's actions in *Jazz*. In fact, Morrison makes this idea of choice the motivating factor behind Violet's attempt to stab Dorcas's corpse during the young girl's funeral. Violet explains that

> That is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the earlobe. That's why. And that's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to (*Jazz*, 95).

Similarly, Joe, who accidentally shoots and kills Dorcas, justifies his infidelity with her because the action represents his choice of determining whom he would love. Because Joe did not feel that he chose his wife Violet—instead it was the young Dorcas with whom he decided to have an affair—he insists upon the righteousness of his adulterous act:

> Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong with my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind (*Jazz*, 135).

Joe and Violet's motivations are clarified when they are viewed within the context of slavery's sexual constraints and the freedom African Americans experienced after Emancipation. This critical concept of choice, cloaked in the metaphorical sexual language of the blues, is portrayed literally in *Jazz*. Morrison makes clear that the

often-humorous double entendres that pervade blues and jazz love lyrics, conceal the darker, sometimes tragic, seriousness with which African Americans exercised this freedom in choosing whom they would love.

Interestingly, the command that Dorcas received from the drums in the parade to pursue a "life-below-the-sash" is a completely different message from the one her Aunt Alice had heard. Alice is not able to pass on to her niece the redemptive, healing effect of the music; but, she is able to transfer to Violet some of the restorative powers of the blues. In January, 1926, one week after Violet's aborted attempt to stab Dorcas's corpse, Violet for no logical reason begins visiting Alice's apartment. After several months the two women even become close friends. In fact, during this time Violet becomes "the only visitor [Alice] looked forward to" (*Jazz*, 83). One morning in March, while Violet is sitting in Alice's kitchen, the women talk so intently that Alice burns clear through the yoke on the shirt that she is ironing:

> Violet was the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter was rocking them both. Violet was reminded of True Belle, who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor hungry and irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall to keep her laughter from pulling her down to the floor with them.... Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears (*Jazz*, 113).

The improbable nature of Alice and Violet's friendship is clear. But while there is no logical reason for their intimacy, their friendship becomes a vehicle for the transmission of Alice's "gathering rope" to Violet.

Furthermore, as this scene dramatizes, Alice's transmission of the blues ritual to Violet does not require any music besides human laughter. Instead, an ironing accident sets off Violet's memory to a time in her youth when her grandmother True Belle came back to Vesper County from Baltimore to save her grandchildren and daughter from poverty and starvation. Rather than succumb to the wretchedness she encounters in the cabin, True Belle rises above her daughter and grandchildren's

suffering and bursts out in laughter. Her laughter is indeed serious and complicated because her laughter is a blues motif: her best response to the misery she sees. This idea of the seriousness of laughter is directly related to the paradoxical elements of rapture and melancholy that Frederick Douglass long ago heard and identified in the blues. In Ortiz Walton's words, in jazz and the blues "both its joys and pains are synthesized and resolved into an emotional-spiritual unity... [which] helps make possible life's continuance" (Walton, 29). And in this novel it is through her friendship with Alice that Violet "learned what she had forgotten" about how to endure her life. Violet rediscovers her ancestral archetypal powers of laughter and she also becomes a blues woman.

Through her friendship with Alice, Violet is able to learn to forgive not only Dorcas but also Joe and herself. As Michael Wood suggests, "*Jazz* is about remembering all we can and yet knowing, when the time is right, how to change the record" (Wood, 10). Near the end of the novel, Violet demonstrates that she is a blues woman when she asks Felice, "What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?... Don't you want it to be something more than what it is?" (*Jazz*, 208). In response to Felice's belief that she cannot change the world Violet says,

> 'That's the point. If you don't, it will change you and it'll be your fault cause you let it. I let it and it messed up my life.'
> 'Messed it up how?'
> 'Forgot it.'
> 'Forgot it?'
> 'Forgot it was mine. My life. I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else.'
> 'Who? Who'd you want to be?'
> 'Not who so much as what. White. Light. Young again.'
> 'Now you don't?'
> 'Now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before' (*Jazz*, 208).

Thus we see that although music does not literally affect or influence Violet's actions, she is a blues woman who has recreated herself and her world the way she

wants it to be. Her repossession of herself demonstrates that she, like Alice, is able to create a new kind of intelligence to define herself. In this manner, she, too, epitomizes the Jazz Age.

Throughout this novel Morrison presents us with a Jazz Age in which African Americans are able to reinvent the world to be better than it seems. Through the many different representations of African-American music in this novel, and the West-African archetypal influences at their source which resurface centuries later, the characters in *Jazz* have created a new definition of themselves and of their era, exemplified by African-American art and culture. In this way, *Jazz* achieves some of the original hopes of the Harlem Renaissance, creating characters who exemplify and who instruct us about the African American's heritage and worth, a key to ending discrimination and false mythologies. But while Morrison is indeed able to give voice to the African-American experience for all readers to hear, the ultimate objectives of the Harlem Renaissance to eradicate racism continue to elude us.

Epilogue

In this paper I have examined four blues characters in Toni Morrison's fiction—Claudia MacTeer, Shadrack, Alice Manfred, and Violet Trace—whose actions are inextricably connected to the music that accompanies them. These four characters recognize the necessity for self-invention in the fractured African-American societies that they inhabit. Through the medium of the blues, they are able to reinvent themselves despite the psychologically crippling remnants of slavery and the cultural attitudes that continue to deny them their identity, self-worth, and heritage. By tapping into and recovering or repossessing important West-African cultural traditions, these characters develop an effective language of protest and resistance and a course of action that enables them to transcend the conditions imposed by social injustice. African-American music, and particularly the blues, as I have demonstrated, gives these characters a way to formulate and express their new identities, and to share the possibilities of redemption and freedom with other characters in their communities.

Morrison is part of a group of African-American women writers who introduce characters who pass on to other members of their communities the healing powers of music. Paule Marshall and Ntozake Shange, to name only two novelists, have also created characters who understand the redemption that can be gained by educating others about their rich West-African cultural heritage that continues to resonate in African-American music. For example, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Jay Johnson, during the early years of his marriage, each Sunday morning sings along with the groups on the radio such as "The Southerners, The Fisk Jubilee Choir, Wings Over Jordan, [and] The Five Blind Boys of Atlanta, Georgia"

(*Praisesong*, 124). Then he recites from memory fragments from poems written by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Weldon Johnson to his young daughter Sis. Marshall acknowledges the importance of Jay's practice when she suggests: "something in those small rites... reached back beyond [his wife Avey's] life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible" (*Praisesong*, 137).

Another character who stresses the importance of African-American culture and music to his children is Greer Brown in Shange's novel *Betsy Brown*. Greer, who is far more methodical about teaching his children about their African-American heritage than Jerome Johnson, each morning straps on his conga drum and "mamboed up the back stairs, through the halls, and down the front steps, gathering the mass of family he called his own, chanting all the while" (*Betsy Brown*, 23). When the children are arranged in the kitchen he then starts quizzing them about the history of African-American music and geography. He asks:

> 'Betsy, what's the most standard of blues forms?'
> 'Twelve-bar blues, Daddy.'
> 'Charlie, who invented the banjo?'
> 'Africans who called it a banjar, Uncle Greer.'
> 'Sharon, what is the name of the President of Ghana?'
> 'Um... Nkrumah, I think.'
> 'Thinking's not good enough, a Negro has got to know' (*Betsy Brown*, 25).

This ethnomusicological quiz demonstrates the depth of knowledge and the seriousness with which Greer approaches the education of his family about their origins and history. As he states, "a Negro has got to know," and when an African American does not know about his or her cultural heritage it can lead to disaster as Morrison demonstrates with the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye*.

Another example of an African-American male character who passes on the redemptive and communicative powers of music to a child occurs in Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. In this work Shange introduces us to Uncle John who

presents Indigo, the young girl, with a violin as a gift and then proceeds to tell her about the "reality of the unreal." Uncle John, unlike Greer Brown who is a well-educated physician, makes his living as a junkman and his historical-cultural message is filled with colloquialisms and grammatical errors. Uncle John explains the importance of music for African Americans:

> Them whites what owned slaves took everythin' was ourselves & didn't even keep it fo' they own selves. Just threw it on away, ya heah. Took them drums what they could, but they couldn't take our feet. Took them languages what we speak. Took off wit our spirits & left us wit they Son. But the fiddle was the talkin' one. The fiddle be callin' our gods what left us/be givin' back some devilment & hope in our bodies worn down & lonely over these fields and kitchens (*Sassafrass*, 27).

Shange clearly demonstrates in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* and *Betsy Brown* the way in which slaves and later generations of African Americans employed music and knowledge of their cultural heritage to reestablish some sense of hope, some reason for survival when everything, including their languages and spirits, was taken from them.

Morrison's other novels also include characters who understand the West-African archetypal powers that music can convey such as Pilot in *Song of Solomon* and Son in *Tar Baby*. It is hoped that this exploration of the ethnomusicological precedents and historical conditions that inform Morrison's fiction will suggest further avenues of study in this area.

Clearly, Morrison has found a way to revitalize the "certain very strong functions," or West-African cultural information that music has provided for African Americans, in a fictional form that all readers should recognize. Her ability to transmit the West-African heritage of her African-American characters plays an essential role in the way she tells stories. Throughout her novels, she has elevated West-African cultural heritage from a subconscious form to an art. And in this way, she, like the four characters I have discussed, is also a blues woman. Angela Davis, in her

discussion of the blues singer Ma Rainey's influential role in keeping African Americans grounded in the tradition of unity and struggle, points out that

> For [Ma Rainey's] audience, whether listening to her records in a small Mississippi town or watching her perform in Chicago, she was a reminder, a witness, an affirmation of Southern black culture as positive, resilient, and life-affirming, even as great numbers of people were being uprooted and displaced from that culture by migration to the North (Davis, 12).

We could, I believe, easily substitute Toni Morrison for Ma Rainey here, keeping in mind the displacement and uprootedness that African Americans have had to endure not only in the migration to the North but since the first slaves were bound in chains for the Middle Passage. In her portrayal of three hundred years of the African-American experience, Morrison's novels, like Rainey's performances, have indeed served as a "reminder, a witness, an affirmation of African-American culture as positive, resilient, and life-affirming."

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